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THE CARLETONS

A Novel.

BY

ROBERT GRANT,

Author of "Mrs. Harold Stagg," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY WILSON DE MEZA.

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THE CARLETONS.

CHAPTER I.

REUNITED.



JOHN CARLETON, when he went away to fight for the Union, had left his five children babies, so to speak; they appeared to him, on his return at the close of the War, grown almost out of recognition. There was William, the eldest, whom every one called Bill, just as they called the next boy Ben instead of Benjamin, the name by which he had been christened after his mother's father. Bill at this time was seventeen, and Ben sixteen. Next followed Constance and Violet, whose ages were fifteen and thirteen respectively; and ten-year-old Harold brought up the rear of the family procession.

They lived in a suburban town only twenty minutes by train from the city, whither their father went every day to transact his business, and the house they occupied, where they had been born and thus far brought up, stood pleasantly on the crest of a gently sloping hill, at one base of which was a large pond. The house, which had belonged to their grandfather, Deacon Benjamin Fitch, and to his father before him, was a spacious dwelling in the colonial style, with large rooms, open hearths and old-fashioned furniture and appliances. Owners of newer cottages occasionally spoke of the old homestead as an old rattletrap, and explained how quickly it would burn up or burn down if it should once catch fire, forgetting, apparently, that it had stood proof for nearly half a century against peril from defective flues, match-gnawing mice and careless housemaids. It was built by Mrs. Carleton's grandfather, Benjamin Fitch, who fought in the Revolutionary War. Her father, Deacon Benjamin Fitch, after living in it all his days and dying without male heirs, devised it to her, the eldest of his three daughters, as her share of his property. Near the house stretched a fruit orchard that sloped gradually up to a bit of lawn, beyond which the buff and white mansion towered up as a land-mark for the neighborhood.

Such was the aspect of the place when John Carleton married Mary Fitch. He was a country lad who had left his father's farm, like many before him, to seek his fortune in a city. After an apprenticeship of half a dozen years in a counting-room, he had started out in the lumber business on his own account, about the same time that he happened to make the acquaintance of the

deacon's pretty daughter, with whom he fell in love forthwith. His love was reciprocated, and, though the deacon hemmed and hawed a little, as a deacon is apt to do when a young man who has his way to make asks for the hand of his favorite child, he gave his consent at last, and they were married. They set up house-keeping in a little box in the village proper, some half a mile from Highlands, as the old homestead was called; but before the end of three years, the deacon's wife having died, and his two other daughters having married and gone to live elsewhere, the old man transplanted the new establishment, which boasted two babies already, to his own fireside.

Twelve months later, he died, too, and when his will was read, John and Mary Carleton found themselves master and mistress of Highlands. Here they had lived ever since, and here the five children, Bill, Ben, Constance, Violet and Harold, had grown up from infancy to youth. John Carleton, who was too much engrossed with his lumber business to take upon himself the responsibilities of agriculture, had leased the greater portion of the thirty acres for cultivation to a neighbor; so that the domain of Highlands, strictly speaking, was limited to the hill-sides, the orchard, and the almost superfluous farm buildings. At every season, the big house itself, as well as the cluster of out-buildings, had furnished a rare abundance of nooks, angles and crannies, closets, cubby-holes and presses appropriate for hiding-places.

There came a time, which lingered vividly in the memory of Bill and Ben, when there was much talk and heated discussion among their elders about "Free

Soilers" and "Union Democrats;" when torchlight processions paraded the streets, and when every school-boy wore around his neck a miniature of one of the four Presidential candidates, thereby reflecting the political preferences of his father. John Carleton's boys were strenuous supporters of Lincoln and Hamlin, whereas Sam Logan and Harrison Fay, the sons of neighbors who lived on the other side of the pond, hurrahed for Bell and Everett, the nominees of the so-called Union party.

As a consequence, Bill and Ben, after sundry skirmishes, were forced to retire under cover of the cow-barn, on the afternoon before election day, in order to escape being pummelled by those worthies, who had reinforced themselves with a big brother apiece of their way of thinking. After the returns came in, and victory sat rampant on the Free-Soil banners, the Carletons were so far elated as to lie in wait for Sam and Harrison after school, and rub their faces with new-fallen snow; a triumph which lost its glamour, however, six months later, when they beheld the two elder brothers aforesaid marching as members of the drum-corps at the head of the first company which the town contributed to help save the Union.

For to Sam and Harrison it was vouchsafed, whenever the company halted, to finger the drum-sticks, and have explained to them the mysteries of the knapsacks and the other accoutrements comprising the kit of their more fortunate brothers, while Bill and Ben looked on with hungry-eyed envy from the edge of the crowd, and wished themselves half a dozen years older, so that they might go to the war, too. But their opportunity

to be proud and important arrived at last, when it came their father's turn to enlist. This was a few months later—months during which the conflict in John Carleton's breast between the love he bore his family and the love he bore his country had perplexed him sorely.

How eagerly he would have joined these first volunteers but for the knowledge that he had a wife and children at home dependent on his labors. So he had swallowed his desire, and bent himself to his daily task in the endeavor to close his ears to the rattle of the drums summoning able-bodied men to rally round the Stars and Stripes, until, a few months later, the news of the Battle of Bull Run threw the North into consternation.

John hurried to his office next day with set lips ; he had determined to enlist. His partner, Henry Hazard, who had been a Bell-and-Everett man, met him with the words :

“I can't stand this any longer ; I'm going to the front.”

“I told my wife the same thing this morning,” answered John.

“We can't both go, or the business will go to the dogs.”

“Bother the business !”

This sounded bravely, but the next moment common sense was whispering in John's ear that he was talking nonsense, which caused him to scratch his head ruefully and survey his partner with a scowl, as he realized that Hazard was right, and that one of them must stay at home. Then, quick as a flash, he drew out of his pocket a gold eagle he had carried there for luck ever since he

had set up for himself in trade, and flipped it into the air.

"Heads or tails, Henry? The one who wins has the choice. Quick! It is a go?"

Hazard nodded, and as the coin struck the floor with a ring, said:

"Heads!"

John stopped feverishly to examine it.

"It's a tail!" he cried, with an elation that he was unable to repress.

"I'll do my utmost to see the business doesn't suffer while you're gone," said Hazard, yielding to fate.

"You deserve to win, Henry, for it was you who spoke first."

"But you are more fit to go, John. It is best, perhaps, as it is."

Hazard was small and rather delicate, while John was tall and strapping.

"I'd rather have lost a leg than have lost the toss," John had said afterward in describing the occurrence; but he was fortunate enough not to lose, like so many poor fellows, either a leg or an arm as a consequence of his patriotism. He was one of the fortunate heroes who went through the War without a scratch, and he had now come back to his family very little the worse for wear, a little grayer, a little older, and with a few more creases in his thin, weather-beaten face, but practically the same old John according to the testimony of his wife, which was assuredly the best.

There had been anxious months of waiting in the interval, months of suspense and uncertainty, when nothing was heard from him, and when the only news

from the army was of disaster. Not only his wife, but the children as well, had learned the terrible meaning of war from the faces of their neighbors whose husbands and fathers and sons were taken from them forever. There were few words spoken, they could only hope with the courage of helplessness, and echo the prayer which fell from the unconscious lips of baby Harold, "Dod bless dear papa, and bring him safe home adain."

It was not strange, therefore, that John Carleton found his boys and girls grown older in their looks and ways, almost grown up, as he said, and no longer the merely exuberant children he had left them. As he glanced around the dinner-table on the day of his return home, a new sense of responsibility mingled itself with his happiness. Here were five young beings on the threshold of the great world, for whose needs, plenty of roast beef, and bread and butter, and warm clothing would no longer suffice. It behooved him to consider forthwith their mental and their moral welfare, how best the boys could be helped to an honest livelihood, and the girls be taught domestic and other virtues that would fit them to become wives and mothers.

He himself had left home when he was fifteen, at which time his schooling had come to an end. He was naturally proud of his success, but, unlike many self-made men, he was not so far infatuated by the fact that he had been moderately prosperous in trade, and was known to be a bustling, driving business man, as to declare that the advantages of a liberal education were over-estimated, and that what had been good enough for him was good enough for his sons. On the contrary, he

had always said that he would scrimp himself to give his boys the chance of going to college if they wished to go there, a conclusion which had the hearty sympathy of his wife, whose ancestors for five generations back had been college-bred men.

Indeed, it had been a thorn in the flesh of Deacon Fitch that one of his daughters should marry a man without reverence for book-learning. Whatever John Carleton may have said on the subject, by way of sheer contrariness, when in the presence of his father-in-law, he was in the habit of admitting, in moments of confidence, that the regret of his life was that his early education had been neglected. Still he was apt to conclude an observation of this kind with some such cheery utterance as :

“ Well, sir, there’s no use in crying over spilt milk. I’m a plain man, but, thank God, I’ve been an honest one so far, and a tolerably successful one, too, even if I do say it who shouldn’t”—a statement which he ordinarily emphasized by diving his hands deep into his troussers’ pockets and squaring his shoulders.

The reflection that something definite as to the future of Bill, at least, ought to be decided without delay, was driven from his mind by the appearance, on fire, of the plum-pudding provided in his honor, which evoked a prolonged traditional “ Whew ! ” of applause. But after its place had been supplanted by the nuts and oranges, and certainly the junior members of the family had become less hilarious from repletion, it recurred to him, and he said :

“ When were you seventeen, Bill ? ”

“ Six months ago yesterday, father.”

"Well, I suppose you'll be about ready to go to college a year from now?"

There was a general pause, and all eyes were directed toward the eldest-born, who, however, appeared to be discomfited by the inquiry, and looked at his plate in silence.

"I heard Bill say the other day he wasn't going to college," remarked Harold, who was a chubby curly-head with big brown eyes.

Bill looked up and glared at the offender.

"How's that, Bill?" asked his father.

"I'd rather go into business."

John Carleton glanced at his wife, whose expression was troubled.

"Don't you want a good education, Bill?"

"You didn't go to college, father."

"No; but I never had the chance. My father wasn't able to send me."

"But you've got on without it."

John could not help feeling pleased in spite of himself at this spontaneous testimony to his own repute, but he felt it to be his duty to point out to Bill the advantages of book-learning.

"Yes, I've got on after a fashion, of course, but that doesn't prove that I shouldn't have got on further if I'd been better educated."

"You're a colonel," interjected Violet proudly, by way evidently of reminding her father that there was not much leeway left for progress on his part.

"Yes, Lettie; but, perhaps I might have become a general if I had known more," he answered, looking up, as he spoke, at his colonel's sword suspended over the

mantel-piece, crossed with an old musket that a Carleton had carried in the Revolutionary War.

"Or President," suggested Mrs. Carleton, fondly.

"The White House would be scarcely in my line, my dear. But for the matter of that, more than one of our Presidents have been self-made men."

"That is they succeeded in spite of their lack of education, and because so many of their constituents were uneducated also."

"You hear what your mother says, Bill? She wants you to go to college."

"But I hate study, father. I've thought it all over carefully, and I don't care to go to college," he continued. "Mother and I have discussed the matter before."

Bill was unlike his father in appearance. As the phrase is, he favored his mother's family, especially his grandfather Fitch, whose compact, thick-set figure and square-jawed, deliberate mien he had inherited.

"A college course would not interfere with your going into your father's office when you were graduated," said Mrs. Carleton.

"After four years! In four years, mother, a fellow can get a mighty good start in business."

"In four years I shall wear my hair up and long dresses," said Violet, fervently; whereat Constance smiled, and Harold sniffed disdainfully. It was the elder sister's smile that rankled, but the little girl's vehement response was addressed to Harold.

"Of course I shall. I'll be seventeen then. Maud Logan is only seventeen, and she goes to parties. So!"

"S-h, children!"

"But she does, mother."

"I know, Lettie; but your father and Bill are discussing a much more important topic."

John Carleton had shoved his hands into his trousers pockets, and sat looking at his eldest-born with a smile which reflected a certain pride that his son should be content to be a chip of the old block. He could sympathize with the youngster's desire to get on with the least possible delay; for it reminded him of his own feelings thirty years before.

"Well, my boy," he said, after a moment, "you'll never be able to complain that you were not given the chance to go to college. I'm not a rich man, but I promised your mother when you boys were born that if by hook or by crook we could afford the outlay, you should have the opportunity. If you don't wish to go, that's another matter. Some fathers under similar circumstances would send you, without regard to your preferences: and I don't say that if I were to imitate them I shouldn't be doing you a service in the long run; but my idea of bringing up children, after they are old enough to have opinions, is to tell them what I consider best for them, and then let them act for themselves. You know that your mother and I would rather have you continue your education; if, however, in spite of that, you are bent on following your own judgment, I shall not interfere. You say you have thought it over; and, if you are still of the same mind on the 1st of January, it seems to me the sooner you enter my office, or some one else's, the better. Eh, Mary?"

"I suppose so," answered the mother, with a sigh "I am more than sorry, though," she continued, regard-

ing Bill, whose commonly imperturbable features were dancing with delight.

"Cheer up, mumsy dear," he said; and rising from his seat he slipped behind her chair, and putting his face against hers, whispered: "If I were to go to college I should only waste my time."

"We must trust to Ben to be the scholar of the family," exclaimed John Carleton, with a cheerfulness which showed he did not take Bill's decision seriously to heart, and nodding in the direction of his second-born.

"Oh, yes, I mean to go," answered Ben, promptly. "That is, if I can pass the examination."

Ben was almost the counterpart of his father in personal appearance. He promised to be tall, thin and wiry; he had bright eyes and the same impulsive manner which suggested earnestness. He was seated next to his mother, who, as he spoke, put out her hand and laid it affectionately on one of his.

"I was sure of this one, but I wanted both," she said.

"It takes all sorts of people to make up a world," answered John. "Besides, you have Harold still to count on. Let me see—you are ten, Harold?"

"Eleven, next month, father."

"Bless me, how the time flies! Before we know it you'll all of you be married and settled, and your mother and I be left alone in the old nest."

"If there's a war I shall go," announced Harold. "And if there isn't," he added, reflectively, "I shall be a hack-driver."

"There, my dear, didn't I tell you that it takes all sorts of people to make up a world?" exclaimed John,

in the midst of the merriment. "Don't let them laugh at you, Harold. I'd rather hold the reins any time than ride inside."

"Constance says she doesn't want to be married," said Violet demurely, a moment after.

"What a story, Lettie Carleton!"

"You said you'd just as soon be an old maid as not."

"What I said was that rather than run after boys, like Maud Logan, I'd die an old maid. And so I would!"

"That's right, Constance," said her father. "Never run after the boys, or the boys won't run after you."

"I don't want them to run after me."

"I notice that they do, though, just the same," said Ben. "I saw Percy White join you yesterday morning, Con, and you let him carry your satchel."

"How could I help it? He would walk with me."

There was a general look of surprised amusement, and Violet, unable to repress her delight, clasped her hands, and cried:

"Oh, Ben! did he really? Did she let him?" while poor Constance turned the color of a peony..

"Gospel truth. I saw them with my own eyes."

"I hated it," protested Constance. "I didn't want him to join me, and he snatched the satchel from my hands."

"Don't mind what she says, Lettie. They were like turtle doves," continued Ben, with a wink. "'Mrs. Percy White' is rather a pretty name."

"Lovel-e-e," giggled Violet, as Constance, who was sitting next to Ben, clapped her hands over his mouth to suppress him.

"You—ought—to have seen—them," articulated the struggling tormentor. "Let me—go—Con—and I'll tell—the—truth—if you'd rather. It was a sight to make Cupid weep with despair," he continued, having freed himself. "Percy had been lying in wait for her ever since breakfast, and as Con passed his gate, out he popped as if it were accidental, and took off his hat with a flourish. I was at Harrison Fay's, and I could see Con blush clear across the street. She looked mad as a hornet, and I thought she'd bolt. You did try to brush past him, didn't you, Con, but Percy wasn't going to be shaken off so easily? He walked along beside you, and somehow he got your satchel. He's pretty far gone on you, Con."

"He's an awful goose," she murmured, bridling with confusion. "If he ever joins me again, I'll turn round and leave him."

"Why should you do that, dear?" said her mother. "There is no sense in being rude."

"He's so silly," Constance answered, with scornful emphasis. "He tries to pay compliments all the time."

"Oh, what did he say, Con?" asked Violet.

"No matter."

"The rose is red," began Ben.

"The violet's blue," continued the younger sister, with another explosive giggle.

"The pink is sweet, and so are you."

"You two are almost as silly as he is," said the victim, with a disdainful air of dignity.

"Never mind, Con, I've no more use for Percy White than you have," asserted Bill. "He has too many frills. Wears kid gloves all the time."

"I know of certain persons who might occasionally follow his example to advantage," observed Mrs. Carleton, with a smile.

"That's meant for us, Ben," said Bill. "The Fays' pup chewed up one of my gloves after church last Sunday. I guess I've got it here!" he exclaimed, groping in his pocket and producing at last a drab-colored conglomeration which only by a stretch of fancy was recognizable as a pair of kid gloves.

"It's pretty hard to tell which is the chewed one," he added, with a rueful laugh.

Mrs. Carleton sighed good-naturedly.

"Look at that, John. I bought those new ten days ago."

"Never mind, mumsy," answered her husband. "You mark my words, it won't be long before he is a thorough-going young dandy."

"Not much, father," said Bill.

"We'll see. I wager that in a year you'll be prinking before the glass and making up to the girls."

"I'm sure he'll never do anything so foolish, father," declared Constance, firmly.

"Indeed, Miss Pink of Propriety! Why, pray, shouldn't he, if his sister walks in the street with young men who wear kid gloves and insist on carrying her satchel?"

"I didn't think you could be so unkind, father. It's all your fault, Ben," Constance added, with a glance of reproach at the author of her woes.

"You'd better be careful what you say, miss, or you'll get no share of what Cousin Rebecca Hubbard leaves me. I saw her to-day and helped her into her carriage,

and I feel pretty confident from her manner that she's thinking of making a will in my favor."

"Pooh!" said Bill. "Violet has the inside track, and she has promised to go halves with me, haven't you, Lettie? How was the old lady looking?"

"A little shaky. I—"

"Children, children, how can you? S-h!" exclaimed their mother, raising a warning finger as the servant-maid re-entered, but smiling in spite of herself.

Cousin Rebecca Hubbard was a family hope. She was Mrs. Carleton's first cousin, a lone spinster possessed of a handsome property, with no nearer relations than cousins, of whom, however, there was a baker's dozen beside the Carletons.

"Did you ask after the parrot?" inquired Violet.

"Of course I did, and I made particular inquiries for the health of Toby, the dog."

At this there was a shout, and Violet cried:

"He died last summer!"

"Golly! So he did. I thought Cousin Rebecca looked a little sharp after I asked the question."

"I wouldn't give a sour apple for your chances!" exclaimed Bill, delightedly.

"Cousin Rebecca Hubbard is a remarkably well-preserved woman," said their father, "and is likely to live these twenty years. It's a mistake, children, to trouble yourselves about other people's money. I've made that a rule all my life and I'm satisfied it's a good one."

"We were not really in earnest, father," said Constance.

"I hope Cousin Rebecca will live till she's one hundred, I'm sure," said Bill, "but it's sort of good fun to

wonder whom she'll leave her property to when she does die, for she's the only rich relation we've got, and she might just as well leave it to us as anybody."

"It's the money a man earns that makes a man of him," answered Mr. Carleton.

"But how about a woman, father?" asked Violet. "She can't make a fortune for herself."

"There's no reason why she shouldn't support herself, though," said Constance, warmly. "I think every woman ought to be able to."

"Yes, if she means to be an old maid!" retorted Violet with a laugh.

"Now, Lettie, you young mischief, you just look out that it isn't you who's the old maid," said her father. "I know a thing or two; and mark my words, you won't be five years older before many a young fellow in search of a wife will be down on his knees to my Constance."

"And the chances, according to present indications, are that Percy White will be the first one down!" ejaculated Ben; at which Violet snickered gleefully.

"Don't mind them, Con," said Mrs. Carleton, sympathetically. "They are too silly to answer."

"I don't mind them a bit, mother. They may try to tease me all they please, now that we have father home again."

"A noble sentiment, Con," said Bill. "Three cheers for father!"

They were given with gusto, and supplemented with a tiger.

The colonel smiled and glanced across the table at his wife, in whose happy eyes tears were already sparkling.

His mouth twitched a little, and he faltered once before he said:

"God bless you all, my darlings. He knows how lonely I have been these four years without your mother and you. But that is past now, and we are once more a united family."





CHAPTER II.

THE CHILDREN.

Mrs. Carleton, the mother of these children, was a cheerful, equable woman, who, as her acquaintance said, took life easily; that is to say, domestic worries and the wear and tear of a good-sized family had not made apparent inroads on her health, or ruffled her habitual serenity of temper. She was wont to declare, when congratulated on this account, that it was natural to her to be easy-going, just as it was in her nature to grow fat as she grew older. Those who had known her as a girl, however, remembered her as rather slim and nervous, from which it might be fairly argued that self-discipline may have abetted nature in producing her present amiable rotundity. She was, moreover, a practical person, with ample knowledge regarding cooking recipes, the care of the sick, precautions against moths, and other vital household concerns. What she termed her leisure was associated in the minds of her husband and children with a pile of stockings or mittens and a darning-needle, to which she was wont to apply herself in a particular arm-chair beside the round table in the parlor, after she had finished the evening paper. She had been an

assiduous reader before marriage, but one saw rarely now a book in her hand. When Ben, as a little boy, on one occasion, had inquired if the reason why she did not read books was because she had read all there were in the world, her answer had been :

“No, my dear ; but I am waiting for you children to catch up with me, in order that we may all go on together.”

Out of this explanation, accepted at the time as valid, had grown a family ambition to catch up with mother ; the fear of never doing which had been efficaciously employed as a check to idleness. And, by way of giving credit to this assumption of knowledge, she had encouraged her children to appeal to her for assistance in their lessons when in straits ; and seldom had they appealed to her in vain for the solution of an intricate problem in arithmetic or the translation of a Latin sentence. To watch her work these answers out was itself a lesson in patience.

One day, however, the self-same Ben had laid before her a page of hieroglyphics, at which she shook her head.

“What is that, my dear ?”

“Greek, mumsy,” was the proud rejoinder.

“It is certainly Greek to me. Take it away, Ben. You have caught up with your mother at last,” she added with a fond smile.

“And, indeed, you have not, Ben,” exclaimed John Carleton, breaking in upon the chorus of triumph which this announcement brought forth from the children. “You may thank your lucky stars, young man, if you

ever catch up with your mother. It isn't only in book-learning that she has a long lead over us all."

"It's of book-learning we're talking, John," she said quietly, "and Ben is right. What was a good education in my day, isn't of much account in this; and correctly, too, for the world should grow wiser as it grows older."

Ben was the student of the family as has been intimated, while Bill was practical and rather matter-of-fact in his tastes. Bill and Constance were devoted to each other, although she was almost as fond of books as Ben. She idolized her eldest brother, and looked to him for advice; and he in turn shared his opinions and secrets with her as with no one else. Ben, without regard to gender, had long ago dubbed them "Damon and Pythias." He, on the other hand, was a constant ally of Violet, rather because each was of an ironical turn of mind, than because their tastes in general were similar.

Constance was tall for her age, and like her father and Ben, spare in face and figure. She had luxuriant auburn hair and a ruddy complexion, but her beauty was her big, brown, wistful eyes, which, as a visitor at the house once expressed it, seemed to be perpetually searching for the infinite. Though sweet-tempered, her expression was habitually grave, and readily became luminous with high resolve, or stern with self-dissatisfaction. The opportunities and obligations of life had begun early to weigh upon her tender spirit, making all else seem trivial.

"The dear child takes everything too seriously," Mrs. Carleton would murmur to herself, with a sigh and shake of the head, as she sat over her darning. "She will fret herself into the grave with her over-con-

scientiousness and self-scrutiny. I do wish she were a little more ready, like Violet, to take the world as she finds it."

At other times, Mrs. Carleton was inclined to wish, with a deeper sigh, that Violet, or Lettie, as she was called in the bosom of her family, had a little more of her sister's sense of responsibility. The pair were signally unlike, both in person and character. Violet, though two years younger than Constance, weighed more. She was a hearty, plump, buxom-looking girl full of animal spirits. Until very recently, she had been content to be a tom-boy, and a photograph, taken a year and a half before, represented her dragging a sled, attired in a reefer and astrachan-trimmed cap, from under which her black hair flowed down, and then up again in a short, curving cataract. She was no longer proud of this, and the epithet, "tom-boy," entered like an iron into her soul, for she yearned to be grown up, and to put away, not only boyish, but girlish deportment. The cataract had now dwindled into a so-called pig-tail confined by a ribbon, and she was looking forward to the day when she would be able to do up her hair like Constance, on whom the privilege seemed entirely lost. Moreover, she had lately revealed a fondness for bright colors in her apparel, which, though somewhat startling in its results, showed that her mind was exercised with what she wore.

"If only it were Constance!" Mrs Carleton would say. "It's as much as I can do to get her to take the faintest interest in her clothes, and the mere mention of the word 'boy' apart from her brothers, drives her into her shell."



CHAPTER III.

THE CHANGE OF FRONT.

About a fortnight after her husband's return home, Mrs. Carleton remarked one evening when the children had gone to bed :

" I had something on my mind, John, and I wonder what you will think of it. What should you say to our moving into the city to live for a few years ? "

He was silent a moment, then he emitted a long, low whistle, and said :

" What put that into your head, Mary ? "

" Oh, I have been thinking about it for some time. I believe that it will be a great thing for the children. They have reached the point where they need something besides country air ; they need polishing. Compare that White boy, who has been staying at his uncle's the past month, with Bill and Ben, and you can see the difference at a glance. Our boys are strong and hearty and manly, but they are awkward and without manners. So with the girls. Constance, on the one hand, is so shy that she nearly went into convulsions when the White boy, who had taken tea here, spoke to her in the street ; and Violet, on the other, has chosen Maud Logan as a

model. To tell the truth, John, Hampton is a small place without any educational facilities, and I want our children to have the best there are."

"So they shall."

"Of course, I was brought up here, and it might be argued that what was good enough for me is good enough for the children, but there weren't so many advantages then, and, so long as a girl was amiable and a good housekeeper, it didn't so much matter about the rest. Now, however, we are practically in the wilderness, in Hampton, so far as opportunities for cultivation. There are fewer nice people left here every year. You know I hate snobbishness, John ; but do you wish to see Violet grow up a second edition of Maud Logan ?"

"Maud is a good-natured soul," said he, with a laugh, "and every one likes her ; but I suppose I see what you mean. How many years have we lived in the old house ?"

"Nineteen next summer—nineteen happy years—and it breaks my heart, in one sense, to leave it ; but that isn't a reason for staying on here, if our judgment tells us that we ought to go elsewhere for the children's sake. You know I wouldn't have breathed a word of such a thing if you hadn't said the other day that the business had done well while you were gone, and that you were feeling comfortable in money matters."

"Hazard carried out his share of the bargain, and no mistake. We've had four good years, but I am not a Croesus yet. Highlands wouldn't bring much if it were put up at auction."

"Oh, but we wouldn't sell it ; we'd let it, or shut it up in winter, and come out here in the summer-time.

Or even if you felt that we had to sell it," she added, noticing the smile on his face, "a few hundred dollars spent in modern improvements and a fresh coat of paint would make it look as good as new."

"I suppose you're not particular as to moving to-morrow?" he inquired, jocularly.

"Oh, John, you mustn't think I'm unreasonable. I want to take time to consider the plan from all sides, and we will talk it over thoroughly; and if, on reflection, you decide that it won't do, or that you can't afford it, there will be an end of it. Only I thought that with Bill going into town to business every day, and Ben preparing for college, and the girls at the critical age when their ideas and manners are in process of formation, it might be sensible for us to take a house in town for a few years."

"Well, it certainly is worth considering," he answered.

The result of this conversation was that one day, a few months later, John Carleton came home with the announcement that he had hired a house in the city, into which they would move as soon as the papering, plastering and plumbing had been put in apple-pie order. This took several months, and it was not until autumn that they were fairly settled in the new establishment. Constance demurred sadly at leaving Hampton and dear old Highlands. She had a hundred associations with the house and the woods and the lake and the farm buildings where they had played, and the trees in the orchard where they had perched themselves to read. Not even the representation that she would be able now to gratify her love of study and her desire to

make the most of herself far more satisfactorily than before, reconciled her to the change, especially as at the same time there were hints dropped as to dancing-school and other preparations for society. Violet, on the contrary, clapped her hands with delight when the plan was disclosed to her, and had been in a state of fever ever since, chiefly, after the first excitement produced by the idea of moving into town subsided a little, over the prospect of having a new room of her own, concerning the furnishing of which she was greatly exercised. Her first suggestion was that the walls should be robin's-egg blue, and the chair coverings old-gold color, which she discarded for white and gilt and crimson plush successively, finally to compromise on a modest blue paper dotted with white sprigs, a chintz and carpet to match, and a neat cherry-wood set.

The boys, on the whole, were pleased at the change. Bill, who was in his father's office, was glad to dispense with the daily trips in the train, though he turned up his nose at the ways of city fellows, whom he affected to despise as dandies and muffs. Ben was gratified at the notion of being well fitted for college, especially as he was not to be separated entirely from Harrison Fay, who, after diverse phases of intimacy from childhood up, varying from month to month from open hostility to bosom friendship, had become his particular crony. Harrison was the son of Doctor Fay, the village physician, and had decided tastes for natural history, which had been fostered by repeated expeditions with Ben after such birds, beasts, insects and reptiles as the woods in the neighborhood of Hampton afforded. He knew all about their habits, and he had made a large collection



RED AS A PEONY, BILL TOOK THE SEAT MADE FOR HIM ON THE BENCH.—See Page 43.

of eggs, one of insects, and another of minerals and like curiosities, of which he was immensely proud. It had not been quite decided what he was to do, except that he was to attend a scientific academy in the city forthwith. His present wish was to be a naturalist, but his father had cautioned him against too hasty a decision until he had dipped into other studies; otherwise, he might discover when it was too late that he would rather have become a civil engineer, an architect or a chemist. As he would have to come to town every day, there would be a chance, Ben hoped, of their meeting occasionally.

The new house was a source of immense satisfaction to the entire family. After the make-shifts and old-fashioned equipments of the country, the entire domestic machinery seemed to run smoothly and slickly as the patent window-shades, which kept Harold absorbed for the first fortnight, until he had put two out of kelter and been forbidden to finger them further. After this he transferred his attention to the elevator, which was manipulated by a rope, and by means of which the wood and coal were hoisted to the several stories by the chore-man, letting himself up and down for the first six days of another week with increasing self-confidence. But on the seventh day, the household were suddenly summoned to the elevator-well by appalling cries. Mrs. Carleton fully expected to discover her youngest hopeful in the basement maimed for life if not dead; but investigation proved that he was only a captive. The elevator had, for some reason, come to a pause half-way between the second and third stories, to the intense alarm of the venturesome Harold. No one could stir the rope, and

there he was stuck, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth. It was necessary to send for a mechanic who understood the machine; and in the meantime the victim, after it was obvious that he was in no danger, was admonished, chaffed and sympathized with in due course. Although it seemed not unfitting that the traditional bread and water of prison fare should be his portion, his mother's heart softened at dinner-time, and a basket of more enticing viands was lowered to him amid general laughter, and before the supper hour he was released from durance vile.

"I wonder who our neighbors are," said Mrs. Carleton one day, when for almost the first time she had what she called a breathing spell.

"The name on the door-plate of the right-hand house is 'Short,'" said Constance, "and there isn't any door-plate or name on the house on the left hand."

"The people who live there are named 'Davis,'" said Violet, with a knowing air.

"How do you know, Lettie?" asked her mother.

"Because Ethel told me so. Her name's Ethel Seymour Davis, and she's six months older than I, but I'm half an inch taller. We measured this morning. She's real pretty, and they have a perfectly lovely house. You ought to see her own room; she has a mirror covered with favors—ribbons and bells and all sorts of pretty things, which she has got at dancing-school. I guess she's a tremendous favorite. She means to ask her mother to let me join her dancing-class. Wouldn't that be splendid, mother?"

"You seem to have made friends fast."

"Oh, we did," she continued, without regard to her

mother's smile. "She told me all about herself. They've lived in their present house about a year, and she and her brother are the only children. He's preparing for college, and his name is Randolph. He'll be in Ben's class. She isn't coming out for three winters, but her father has promised to have a birthday-party for her when she's sixteen, which will be in February, and she thinks she'll ask me. I told her I thought you'd let me go, mother. Ethel says there'll be other girls there only fifteen. Can I, mother?"

"When the invitation comes, we'll see, my dear."

"I suppose she's your best friend now, Lettie," remarked Ben, who had been lured from his book by the conversation.

Violet had the reputation of forming desperate intimacies, which were apt to cool, after a time, almost as rapidly.

"I am sure I shall like her very much," she replied, imperturbably. "We introduced ourselves to each other this morning, over the railing between the grass plots, and she invited me to come over to her side."

"By the way," said Ben, "I met Percy White in the street to-day, and he says he's coming to see us. He lives only a block or two off, in the next street."

"Well, we shall be glad to see him again," said Mrs. Carleton.

She had taken a decided fancy to Percy during the few weeks he had spent at his uncle's house at Hampton, and she gave him a cordial welcome when he appeared, a day or two later, in keeping with his promise.

Percy was a pleasant-looking, gracious young fellow, a few months older than Bill. His father, the Hono-

able Gregory White, had lost a leg, before he was twenty-one, by an explosion. Incapacitated by his wooden leg for active service in the War, he had shown himself public-spirited and generous when occasion offered, by liberal subscriptions, and, lately, an admiring constituency had sent him to Congress. He was a large, commanding-looking, florid man, with a sonorous, persuasive voice and winning smile, which accounted for his son's engaging manners.

Percy seemed glad to see them all again, and was able to enlighten them as to a variety of matters, including their neighbors. He described the Davises as out-and-out swells ; genuine upper-crust, he called them. Randolph, or Ranny, was in the class below him at the same school, and rather a "sissy," but a gentlemanly fellow. The Shorts, on the other side, were a quiet couple, whom no one saw much of, though they had a house full of pretty things, for they weren't exactly in society. Mr. Short's father had made a pot of money out of patent-medicines.

"My father used to know him when he drove a peddler's wagon out West," Percy explained.

Percy ran on fluently and graphically, imparting information and his views on a variety of topics, now and again fingering the light cane he carried. He was sprucely dressed for visiting, in a well fitting black coat, with a standing collar and variegated neck-tie, and had quite a manly as well as trig appearance. While Mrs. Carleton, Ben and Violet were evidently diverted by what he was saying, Constance sat tongue-tied and in awkward silence, merely answering the questions which he occasionally addressed to her, while Bill

regarded him with a morose expression that was almost contemptuous, with his eyes riveted on the cane. Perhaps Percy noticed this, for he presently said :

"I suppose it's awfully cheeky for a Sub-freshman to be carrying a cane, but I like to have something in my hand. And I mean to carry it next year, Sophs or no Sophs. I shall be a Soph when you're a Freshy, Ben, and you'll have to toe the line."

He was full of enthusiasm as to going to college, and had recently been off to engage a room, the furniture of which he was to choose himself. After finishing college, he was to go abroad for a year or so before getting his nose down to the grindstone, as he described it.

When he had taken his leave, Violet pronounced him "awfully attractive," and Ben styled him "a pretty smart fellow."

"He may be smart," said Bill, "but he puts on tremendous airs. I hope the Sophomores will give it to him when he gets in."

Constance said nothing at the moment, but she and Bill talked him over later, and came to the conclusion that he didn't amount to much.



CHAPTER IV.

BILL SNATCHES VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT.

Bill was now the proud occupant of an office-stool in his father's counting-room. There were four other clerks beside his father and Mr. Hazard. He copied invoices, ran errands, wound up the clock, and made himself generally useful. The old head-clerk, in spare moments, gave him lessons in book-keeping. In the middle of the day he had a half-hour to go out for dinner, which he took sometimes at one restaurant, sometimes at another. In consequence, he felt that he had come to man's estate, and that there was a wide gulf of information and knowledge of the world between him and his brothers and sisters. He had conceived at once an immense admiration for the head-clerk, Mr Sanborn, who seemed to him a model for a business man to imitate.

Mr. Sanborn was a pattern of punctuality, and all his actions were regulated by a hunter watch which kept perfect time. He knew precisely how much it ought to vary in every six months, and could recount the precise history of its behavior during the fifteen years he had carried it. The watch was of gold, but the chain was a black ribbon, which was in harmony with the general

sobriety of his appearance. He entered the office at precisely half-past eight every morning, and left it at precisely half-past five to go home. At precisely half-past twelve he left whatever he was doing to eat his dinner, which he brought with him in a tin box, and which he ate with the greatest deliberation. After it was finished, he washed his hands and read the newspaper for just a quarter of an hour. He was never in a hurry, and the ledgers and journals over which he pored were flawless ; without erasures or interlineations. As soon as he entered the office, he exchanged his coat for a faded fustian jacket, that never seemed to grow any worse-looking. He was a bachelor, now nearly sixty-five, and his chief interest in life, apart from the affairs of Carleton & Hazard, so far as the clerks who served under him knew, was his gold watch.

The example of Mr. Sanborn affected Bill powerfully, though he was naturally more or less deliberate and methodical. He endeavored to be punctual and steady in his turn ; never to be late in arriving at the office, and to be systematic in performing his work. He kept an old jacket in the cupboard so as to save his clothes, and on the section allotted to him of the long desk at which the clerks sat on high stools, his pens and pencil and eraser and ruler and bottle of red ink had each its particular place, and were always in condition for use. Mr Sanborn was delighted with his pupil, and prophesied that he would make a successful merchant ; and Bill's sense of importance was still further magnified, when his father at the end of six months made him a present of a silver watch, a huge, old-fashioned one that he had carried for many years. A new platinum chain, that

looked enough like silver to be taken for it, accompanied the venerable time-piece as a present from his mother, and after Constance had manufactured a shammy case for him, Bill felt that he was fairly established in the business community.

The only cloud upon his horizon at the moment was dancing-school, which he had to attend once a week. Mrs. Davis, the next-door neighbor, had called a day or two after her daughter's conversation with Violet, and invited the Carleton children to attend Professor Bosenta's dancing class. Violet was the only one of the four eager to go, and it was she whom her mother felt compelled finally to keep at home, on account of the expense. Mrs. Carleton argued that Constance and Bill ought to be sent at once, if they were ever to go, and as Ben had but one more year at home before going to college, it seemed wise to send him also.

The class was a select one. Indeed Mrs. Davis considered that she had acted very handsomely in making room for this family from the suburbs, whom nobody seemed to know very much about except the Gregory Whites. It was chiefly out of consideration for Mrs. White that she had admitted them, and as she scanned the trio who appeared on the opening day she did not feel sure that she had not made a mistake. She had expected that Violet, who had struck her as likely to become a favorite, would attend. Instead, here were these two gawky boys, and a girl who, though pretty enough, was evidently retiring, and, if not precisely gawky, too, not over well-dressed.

This was not exactly the novitiate of any of the three, for a year or two before they had learned their steps

and the rudiments of various dances from a teacher who visited Hampton once a week ; but they were undeniably rusty, especially Bill. Constance could waltz tolerably well, and Ben, though awkward at first, soon caught the step and began to enjoy himself. Bill, however, even after half-a-dozen lessons, hobbled and halted in a fashion that was not only mortifying to him, but sorely tried the patience of the dancing-master. Moreover, he was excessively shy as regards girls. In order to avoid taking a partner, he would slip out with one or two other kindred spirits into the dressing-room just before a dance, whenever they had the opportunity, which was, however, a very ostrich-like proceeding, for Professor Bosenta, who knew their habits, almost invariably peeped into this retreat before starting the dance, particularly if there were not boys enough to go round. Then the culprits had the mortification of being conducted across the floor before everybody, and summarily made to dance with the girls who were without partners. One day, however, Bill managed to conceal himself behind the door of the ante-room in such a manner as to escape detection when the professor discovered his companions. He heard the door close, and presently the fiddle begin ; he was safe for this dance. He chuckled with delight at the thought of how cleverly he had outwitted "old Bo," as the master was nicknamed, and sauntered about the dressing-room with his hands in his pockets, congratulating himself. He had no doubt that when the music ceased he would be lost in the crew of boys that was sure to come pouring in.

All went at first as he expected. The moment after

the fiddle stopped, the dressing-room was full, and he had the satisfaction of recounting his exploit to an interested audience ; after which, at what he judged to be a favorable moment, he sauntered back nonchalantly into the hall.

It chanced that the professor was standing close by the door. Bill instinctively dodged back, but too late to avoid notice. Had he advanced boldly, he would, doubtless, have escaped, but the guilty start reminded the dancing-master that he had been absent during the dance ; at a time, too, when there had been several girls left over. With a quick movement, the professor stepped forward and caught the culprit by the arm, then rapped attention with his bow on the back of his fiddle. Everybody stopped talking and looked.

“Where have you been, Master William Carleton ?” he asked, in his precise foreign accent.

Bill gave a sickly sort of smile, and answered faintly :
“In the dressing-room.”

The master, who was evidently angry, surveyed him for a moment, then exclaimed with glib irony :

“You are very fond of the young ladees, I believe ?”

The culprit, uncertain how to meet this method of attack, looked merely shame-faced and then down at his pumps, without reply.

“Come with me, sir,” the professor continued.

So saying, he took Bill by the sleeve and conducted him, amid loud tittering, across the floor to the side of the room where the girls sat. On one bench there happened to be six of them side by side.

“Young ladees,” said he, mockingly, “Master William

Carleton is very anxious to sit with you. Can you make a place for him?"

The girls giggled, and there was a general laugh. Red as a peony, Bill took the seat made for him on the bench. He felt that every eye in the room was fixed on him, as indeed every eye was. He did not know where to look. Then, in his desperation, he returned the universal gaze of merriment with a fierce stare, which was not modified even when it met his sister's pitying, sympathetic glance. His only consolation was that his mother was not there to see him made a fool of.

Suddenly one of the girls beside him let fall her fan. He had resolutely up to this moment ignored the existence of the entire six, who, strong in their superiority of numbers, had continued to giggle and whisper. For a single instant he hesitated, then, in spite of himself, he bobbed down to pick it up. As he did so, the girl stooped also, and their heads collided.

"Excuse me," he muttered, almost savagely.

"It was my fault," was the conclusive reply.

Everybody was laughing again, and Bill felt himself blushing more deeply than ever, yet he felt constrained to blurt out :

"Not at all."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Carleton," said the young lady as she received the fan. Forced to look at her, he perceived that she was no other than Ethel Davis, whose acquaintance hitherto he had avoided making.

"Don't mention it," he grunted; but the ice was broken, for he saw fit to add, with a little more graciousness : "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Not a bit," said Ethel; and then she remarked, in

her turn : "We're neighbors, aren't we, Mr. Carleton ? I think I see you in the mornings going down to your business, and I know your sister."

"Oh, yes," said Bill.

Here there was a pause, and while he was thinking what else he could say, Percy White came up and asked the young lady in question for the pleasure of a waltz, and a few moments later, the Professor gave Bill permission to go back to his own side of the room. Despite his mortification, somehow he felt secretly pleased with himself. Apart from his sisters, he had never before said so much to any girl in his life, and he secretly reflected that it was not so very terrible after all, and he even went so far as to conclude, that for a beginning, he had not acquitted himself badly.





CHAPTER V.

THE NEW ENVIRONMENT.

While Bill was learning the rudiments of business at his father's office, Ben was pegging away at his studies preparing for college. Ben was at this time rather a raw-boned looking youth, tall and straggling as a young poplar, but wide-awake and quick-witted. His new master, who found him a little behind some of the boys of his age in knowledge of the requisites for entering college, was surprised at the facility with which he was catching up.

Every evening after tea, as soon as the things were cleared away, Ben and Constance and Violet sat down at the table in the dining-room to prepare their lessons for the next day. Their parents sat in the parlor upstairs with the door shut, in order that Bill's thrumming on the piano might not be too audible. Bill insisted, now that he was a hard-working business man, that he should be exempt from studying in the evenings, but he had consented by way of compromise to devote them to practicing. He had conceived the idea of learning to play on the piano, and was taking lessons two afternoons in the week, for which purpose he was let off from the office half an hour earlier. Although anxious to learn,

and therefore painstaking and persistent, he had little ear for music; consequently his labored repetition of the same piece over and over again palled somewhat on his sisters, who were tolerably proficient on the piano, and likewise upon Ben, who, though he had never taken lessons, had a natural ear and could generally pick out an air merely from having heard it whistled.

Each of the trio in the dining-room had a regular studying place at the table, and for the first three-quarters of an hour there was apt to be dead silence, except so far as attempts to commit to memory by reciting just above the breath was a violation of it. Both Constance and Violet were wont to adopt this method of clinching in their minds the lists or rules which they were given to learn. Violet, when she memorized thus, kept her eyes shut; Constance kept hers open, and many were the discussions as to the merits of the respective systems.

On the other hand, Ben could commit nothing to memory while sitting still. Whenever he wished to learn anything by rote he required to slip out into the hall and walk up and down until he knew it. All his lessons which depended on memory were learned in this way. It had grown out of a habit, which he had contracted as a little boy, of walking or rather running up and down on tip-toe with a card or book in his hand, apart by himself, and reciting in a whisper his experiences of characters of his own creation. He was accustomed to use the same card or book for this purpose until it was in holes from thumb-marks. Though these narrations were not confined to any one subject, he became especially fond of military affairs after the War broke out; but his engagements on sea and land were

not limited merely to the annihilation of the Confederates ; his favorite generals made incursions into Great Britain and carried the Stars and Stripes into the remotest limits of Africa, in a manner to make the most thorough-going patriot green with envy. Ben's "running," as it was called, was one of the accepted institutions of the household, but as he was reserved and haughty when interrogated upon the subject, and became excessively angry if spied upon, he was rarely observed, and had never been actually overheard but once. That "once," however, which had been early in his career, had supplied the family a jewel of imagination never to be forgotten, and one had only to utter "the cat laid an egg" to bring the blush to Ben's cheek to this day.

Ben usually finished his lesson first. When he had done so, he would close his lexicon with a bang, by way of announcing the fact, and that he was prepared for conversation or a game of some kind. If neither of his sisters were ready to join him, he would commonly amuse himself by drawing. He had the happy knack of being able to sketch in an off-hand fashion whatever struck his fancy. The fly-leaves and margins of his school-books were covered with all sorts of figures and devices. Though he was fond of drawing scenery and landscapes, when off tramping with Harrison Fay, his real forte was portraiture. He could hit off a likeness to the life, and so grotesquely, if he chose—and his inclination seemed to run that way—that one could not help laughing, while admitting that the resemblance was perfect. He had once perpetrated a sketch of Cousin Rebecca Hubbard, which, in the estimation of

the family, would hopelessly ruin his chances of a legacy, should that lady ever get a glimpse of it.

In spite of the fact that he was thus perpetually decorating scraps of paper, Ben's talent had never been taken very seriously at home. They all recognized of course, that he had a certain faculty with his pencil, but it was looked upon as a pleasing knack, and very much as Bill's proficiency in playing hockey on the ice was regarded. Nor had Ben, up to this time, made much account of it himself. It had been taken for granted, ever since they were little boys, that he was to be a lawyer and Bill a business man ; or, as his father once put it, Bill was to make the money, and Ben was to see to keeping it after it was made. Accordingly, when asked what he was going to be when he grew up, his habitual answer was :

“A lawyer, I guess.”

Sometimes it happened, in the evenings, that when Ben gave his signal, only one of the girls had finished her lesson. In such cases, diversion, if indulged in at all, had to be muffled. But the one who had not finished was more than apt to be Constance, because of the rule prescribed by her teacher that she must study an hour at home, whether she had learned her lessons before the completion of that time or not. She was required to sign a card every morning, stating that she had studied a full hour, and her conscience was kept continually on the rack by doubts as to whether she had really done so. She found it excessively hard to fix her mind on her lesson after it was learned, when Ben and Violet were whispering together; and, although she would put her hands over her ears to shut out what

they were saying, she had often terrible scruples as to whether she had actually studied at such moments, which resulted occasionally in her leaving the room and satisfying her conscience by a quarter of an hour's extra work apart by herself. In order to keep the run of time precisely, she always had her mother's watch by her side, and rigorously excluded from her hour all the minutes wasted by interruptions of any kind.

It was not altogether unnatural that Ben and Violet, whose home-study was regulated by no such rule, should amuse themselves sometimes at her expense. They would allude to matters which they knew would interest her, speaking just loud enough to be heard, or Ben would call attention to some humorous sketch which he had made, often one of the unhappy victims herself in the throes of conscientiousness. Constance, in her turn, unable to refrain from smiling in spite of her best endeavor, would shut her ears and even her eyes in efforts to concentrate her attention on her book, until, perhaps overwhelmed by one of Violet's explosive giggles, she would fly from the presence of her tormentors to the security of the hall or her own chamber.

Constance was quite as much absorbed in her studies as Ben in his; moreover, she was an omnivorous reader, so much so that her mother had to drive her out-doors in the afternoon to get her to take the proper amount of exercise. She had been given the first choice of chambers, and, after careful deliberation, had selected as hers one in the top of the house, a large, sunny room at the back, looking out, thanks to a gap in the block behind afforded by a grass plot and miniature garden, toward the west, where the sun went down

every night behind picturesque hills. Here she had supplemented her dearest possessions brought from Highlands with others that were growing precious. Indeed, though fickleness was abhorrent to her nature, she had already remanded many of her past belongings to the closet as out of keeping with the general elegance of her new apartment. "Duds" and "truck" they had been stigmatized by Sophia, the old family nurse, now rather a confidential friend of the household than a servant, who, if she could have had her way would have whisked into the fire the entire collection of relics, pinecones, birds' feathers, pressed wild-flowers, ornamented texts, ferns and numerous other pet reminders of her childhood, which Constance had insisted on bringing into town with her.

"They're only fit for breeding moths and collecting dust," had been Sophia's withering verdict when the question first arose as to where they were to go; and, little by little, Constance had consented to the disappearance of most of them, reserving only the right to choose between the store-closet in the attic and the ash-barrel.

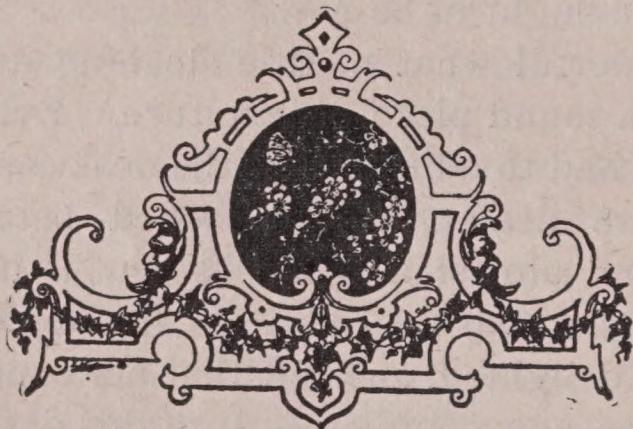
Her room was certainly a very livable spot. The sun in winter-time beat in there so warmly that Constance would wrap herself in a rug on the lounge and throw open the sash on a fine, frosty morning when the snow was on the ground and be able to read without discomfort. This lounge stood within reaching distance of the little book-case where her library was collected, all the books she had ever received since she was old enough to care for them. In addition to her library, and next to it in her affections, there was an old-

fashioned writing-desk which had been in the Fitch family for generations, and which she had been allowed to bring with her from the drawing-room at Highlands for her own use. It was a veritable antique piece of furniture, with brass claws'-feet and handles, full of pigeon-holes and queer accommodations. Sophia turned up her nose at it contemptuously as a very second-rate article compared with the cunning little secretary that had been bought for Violet ; and in response to the explanation that it was very old, remarked :

“ Sure, Miss Constance, I’m thinking that everything in this house ought to be new.”

It is wonderful what a little cleaning and polishing will do for a sound piece of furniture. Even the censious Sophia had to admit, when the desk came back from the furniture dealer, that it looked better than she expected, and almost as good as new, if it weren’t for them claws that tear the carpet.” As for Constance, she was simply delighted, and felt that her sanctum, as Ben called it, was now complete. Into this desk went now her secret possessions ; her favorite extract book, a wisp of Bill’s hair when a baby and one of her own, a daguerreotype of her grandfather Fitch, and—most sacred of all—her diary. She had kept a diary ever since she was twelve, and there were now four volumes. Here were recorded her doings and impressions from time to time, written as she was in the mood every few days, with an occasionally longer gap. Although her brothers and Violet had each in turn threatened to purloin these precious volumes, no mortal eye except the owner and compiler’s had ever rested on their contents. This

diary, as it were, took the place of an intimate friend to Constance. At Hampton there had been no girl of her own age in the neighborhood but Maud Logan, with whom she was not sympathetic ; so that she had been thrown back upon herself for companionship, especially since Violet, in addition to being younger, had interests of a different kind. It was partially in order that Constance might have the chance of meeting other girls that Mrs. Carleton had been anxious to move into town.





CHAPTER VI.

A MESSENGER IN TINSEL.

One Saturday morning in the middle of the winter, on which, being a school holiday, as every Saturday was, Constance had stretched herself on the lounge in her room with a book she was absorbed in, there came a rat-tat-tat at the door, and in response to her permission to enter, a formal procession, headed by Ben, and consisting besides of Violet and Harold, marching in single file, advanced toward her. On the threshold behind them appeared Sophia, who had her apron up to her mouth to cloak a broad grin. Ben held out an important-looking envelope, which she took from him with the suspicion born of experience.

It was addressed to Miss Constance Carleton, with the correct number of the house and street, and she noticed that around the borders of the envelope, which was unusually large, ran a sort of ornamental scroll.

"It's a valentine," said Harold, gleefully, as she started to remove the colored wafer which served as a seal, "Somebody left it at the door and ran. I heard him go down the steps, but I wasn't quick enough. The post-

man brought me this colored one. I guess I know who sent it, too. It was Lettie."

Whereupon he removed his hands from behind his back and exhibited a terrible looking daub that purported to symbolize a monster of greediness, with an appropriate couplet beneath.

"Nonsense, Harold. It isn't my hand-writing to begin with."

"I guess you sent it, though. You might have got some one to write the address. No one else knew I eat the cake in my stocking on Christmas before morning," he added, a little ruefully.

"It's appropriate, anyway," said Violet.

In the meanwhile, Constance, who had colored vividly as the significance of the envelope was explained to her, had undone the seal, and, under eager scrutiny, taken a peep at the contents.

"Let's see, Con," exclaimed Violet on tip-toe. "It must be an awfully pretty one."

Constance drew back coyly, saying :

"I haven't had a chance to look at it myself, yet."

"I pray you, pretty maid divine.
Consent to be my valentine,"

chanted Ben, who had planted himself on the arm of the lounge, and was surveying Constance banteringly.

"Is that what it says?" asked Harold.

"It ought to say that or something like it. O-o-o!" Ben ejaculated admiringly, as Constance drew from its inclosure a gorgeous concatenation of tinsel filigree-work.

"How perfectly lovele-e," sighed Violet. "I wonder who sent it? The postman brought me one, too, but I know Ethel sent it. She told me she was going to. Mine isn't half so pretty as yours, Con."

As she spoke, she took a smaller envelope from her pocket, to show the comparison. The two were certainly not to be mentioned in the same breath. Violet's was a pretty little card on which roses and a robin redbreast were not too inartistically blended above the inscription, "A token of friendship." But Constance's was evidently intended to be the highest exemplification of the valentine-maker's art. A wealth of glistening tinsel in imitation of lace formed the margin of a lake upon which two swans floated majestically; and when the page was turned, the lake became a mirror set in a chaplet of roses with doves soaring among azure and saffron-tinted clouds overhead.

"How perfectly exquisite!" murmured Violet, with genuine enthusiasm.

"Puffectly exquisite!" mimicked Ben. "It *is* pretty, though, and no mistake," he assented, admiringly. "What's that written at the bottom?"

"And I can see my face in the glass," cried Harold, with delight. "It's a real one."

"Of course it is, youngster. I say, Con, what is that written at the bottom?" he repeated, as Constance, warned by his first inquiry, instinctively closed the page.

"Oh, yes, let's see it," said Violet, eagerly.

Constance flushed, and shook her head.

"It's mere doggerel," she said.

"You were mighty quick in reading it, though. She must, Lettie, have looked at it before she looked at anything else. I guess she must know who sent it."

"I haven't the slightest idea who sent it, Ben."

"Then why won't you let us read what it says?"

"Because I don't care to," answered Constance, after a moment's hesitation.

"It must be something awfully sugary, Lettie."

"She doesn't know for certain that it was a boy who sent it. It may have been a girl," said Violet, trying a different kind of shaft.

"It's silly stuff, whoever sent it," said Constance, disdainfully.

"I'll bet ten to one it was a boy who sent it, and that I can name the boy!" cried Ben. "Did you notice they were written and not printed?"

"Then I forbid you to name him," said Constance, drawing herself up with dignity.

"It was—" Ben stopped and laughed. "It was—" He began again and stopped once more. There was the presage of tears in Constance's eyes.

"Now, Mr. Ben, quit tormenting Miss Constance," said Sophia.

"She doesn't know who sent her valentine, and I was going to tell her," replied Ben. "That's all."

"That's all, Sophia," said Violet, with a giggle.

"And you've a sassy tongue, too, Miss Lettie, when you've a mind," said the nurse, nodding her head.

"But I haven't said a word," protested Violet. "What have I said?"

"It isn't always the saying that does the harm ; there's looking and there's listening and there's laughing. Get

along with you now, all three, and leave my young lady alone," and, as she spoke, Sophia laid her hand upon the shoulders of Ben and Violet, and motioned Harold toward the door with a nudge from her knee.

Ben shook himself loose, and began again, tauntingly :

"It was—" but realizing from Constance's expression that she would cry if he completed his sentence, he stopped short for the third time, and, thrusting his hands into his trousers' pockets, after the fashion of his father, said : "I don't see the use of getting mad about it, Con. I guess it must be pretty serious if there's so much mystery connected with it. Come on, Lettie, let's leave her." Thereupon he strode from the room, followed by the two others.

Sophia remained a moment to play the part of comforter to her young lady, who, though the nurse was devoted to them all, was her special favorite.

"I wouldn't mind their rattle, if I were you, Miss Constance. They don't mean nothing by it," she began, as she flourished her feather duster over the mantel-piece.

But Constance was in no mood to be communicative. She had thrown herself on the lounge, where she remained majestically silent, with her hands clasped under her head and her eyes fixed on the ceiling, in the teeth of this and one or two other remarks which Sophia let fall from her store of sympathy ; until the nurse, taking a hint that her presence was superfluous, gave a final dab at the wash-stand with the duster, and left the room, shutting the door after her as requested, at the last moment, by her young lady.

Constance lay in the same posture without moving

for several minutes. Now that the affair was over, she had begun to ask herself if she had not been too sensitive. As Ben had said, it was making a mystery out of nothing ; for what difference did it make who sent the valentine, or who any one thought sent it ? She ought to have taken the whole thing as a joke, instead of appearing disturbed.

When she had thought this out, she picked up the source of her troubles, which had fallen upon the floor, and examined it carefully. While she had perceived before that the verses were written instead of printed, and had gathered in a general way their import, she had not really read them. As she did so now, a flush rose to her cheeks, and a look came into her face that was half a look of shame and half of pleasure, and when she had finished them, she gave a surreptitious glance over her shoulder, as though to make sure that no one had opened the door and was observing her unawares. The lines ran as follows :

“ Maid with the big brown eyes
And angel-like expression,
You do not heed my sighs,
But list to my confession :
I know of no one half so sweet,
Who walks beneath the sky ;
And I will be your valentine
Forever and for aye.”

Who had sent it ? There was no signature, no clew of any kind as to the author on either the valentine itself or the envelope. Constance examined both

minutely, in order to make sure, and flattered herself that she was completely in the dark so far as real, actual knowledge was concerned. Who could have sent it? As Violet had suggested, it might have been another girl. But she had to admit, reluctantly, that the lines were scarcely of the style which one girl would have written to another. If any boy had written them, why had he written them, and who could he be? As she lay speculating thus, and playing hide-and-go-seek with her own secret consciousness that the chances were ninety and nine out of a hundred that only one particular boy had sent them, a faint flush still heightened her cheeks, and the look of mingled shame and satisfaction changed to a wistful, pensive gaze, that was not timid only because it was safe from scrutiny. She believed that she considered the verses very silly, and that she was rather angry with the sender, in case he were by chance the one she thought he might be; and yet she detected herself, without much compunction, reading them over again more than once, and somehow, though she kept threatening to herself to throw the whole thing into the fire, she never did.

Indeed, the morning slipped away almost without her knowledge, and she was roused to a realization of the hour only by Ben's whistle, as he came upstairs. Constance heard him go into his room and shut the door. For a few moments she sat in irresolute discomfort, wrestling with herself.

"He'll make dreadful fun of me," she murmured with a shiver.

Then, after another moment, she rose suddenly, and opening her door, crossed the entry-way with the

decided step of one who has reached a definite decision, and knocked on Ben's door. She had the valentine in her hand, and as he confronted her, she held it out to him, saying :

"Here it is, Ben. I was foolish to make a fuss."

Ben received it mechanically ; then, realizing what she meant, he exclaimed, as he made way for her to enter :

"Oh ! that was all right, Con. We hadn't any right to tease you, especially about anything private like that."

"But it wasn't private," she protested, eagerly. "I want you to read it."

"Well, if you really want me to, of course I will," he replied, hesitatingly. "Only you mustn't let me merely because I tried to get you to before."

"No, that isn't the reason at all," she said, which was true enough, for her previous purpose had already been forgotten in her desire that Ben should not think she wished to harbor a secret of this sort. "They're too silly for anything."

Ben read to the end with his quizzical smile without a word, while she sat watching him with much the same emotions with which one watches a dentist select his instrument of torture.

"Why, I think they are very pretty," he said, with evident sincerity.

Here was a surprise. She, in her heart, thought them very pretty herself.

"Do you ?" she murmured. "But they are so ridiculous."

"You must allow for poetic license, Con. Besides, a valentine is expected to be—er—complimentary, to say

the least. No, I think they're just the thing. It must be rather nice to be able to write verses," he added reflectively. "I'd no idea that Perc—"

He stopped short as if he had been shot, suddenly realizing what he had said, and colored to the roots of his hair. Constance did the same, and as their eyes met they burst out laughing simultaneously.

"Excuse me, Con. I really didn't mean to—upon my word I didn't," he protested. "What an idiot I am."

"I don't mind in the least, Ben. Why should I? Do you think he sent them?" she added, shyly.

"Who? Percy White?"

"That was who you said, wasn't it?"

"I'd like to shoot myself. What's said is said, I suppose. Yes, I'd an idea it was he, but I don't know anything about it really."

"I'd sort of an idea myself that it might be he, because—because there's no one else who could, though I don't know why he should have sent them, I'm sure."

Ben begged ten thousand more pardons, as he expressed it, for his clumsiness in letting the cat out of the bag, which Constance was willing to grant, and afterward they became so absorbed in talking about other matters that they failed to hear the dinner-bell and Sophia had to trudge puffing upstairs to notify them that their soup was cooling. It was not often that Constance paid Ben a visit. Indeed, as she looked round his room, she was ashamed to realize how little she knew of his life and tastes. All her intimacy had been with Bill, and although Ben's room and his were side by side, she had to own to herself that she had scarcely been inside of it until to-day. There was certainly a

great contrast between the two apartments. In Bill's, as in her own, there was marked precision. Each chair had its particular place. The ornaments and pictures, all of which Bill had in his room at Highlands, were arranged symmetrically just as he wished them to remain, and Sophia had directions to readjust everything to a pot after sweeping, exactly as she found it.

On the other hand, Ben's room had almost the semblance of a museum, and to an eye used to precise effects, a disorderly museum. Over the door hung a horse-shoe which he had picked up on the road years before. An owl, an early gift from Harrison Fay, which, as Sophia constantly declared, was a standing invitation to moths, looked down from the book-case. Scattered over the table and bureau and mantel-piece was a conglomeration of birds' nests, boxing-gloves, marbles, sketch-books, skates, a toy theatre, a postage stamp album, and sundry games of one kind or another, while in one corner stood an old double runner, several bats and hockeys, and a magic-lantern. On the walls was a variety of pictures, of which a few were old-fashioned prints of the sporting order, which he had rescued from Highlands, and the rest chiefly newspaper illustrations of considerable diversity. These he had pasted on card-board and arranged at random. A huge magenta handkerchief emblazoned with the flags of all nations covered a square in their midst at the side of his bed, over which his shot-gun was installed.

While Bill was appreciative of the disadvantages of dust but disliked to have his things touched for the fear of their disarrangement, Ben constantly declared that he preferred dust, and that spick and span arrangement

was all he dreaded. The efforts of Sophia to get him to reduce the number of his cherished possessions on the plea that it took an able-bodied woman all her time, as she expressed it, to look after them, had consequently been futile.

"It makes no difference to me if it is never dusted or swept," he would say, "as long as you don't come mousing round, Sophia, and putting things where I can't find them."

Constance, while she and Ben chatted, made the tour of the room, inspecting the illustrations on the walls and his other belongings with genuine interest, asking now and again: "Oh, where did you get this, Ben?" or "What is this, Ben?" Among them were representations of world-famous pictures or edifices or statues, many of them classical, which he had come across in his studies, and among them here and there was a copy of a sketch of his own, generally with a bit of comicality tucked in somewhere to relieve the seriousness, if it were not a purely humorous story. Such blendings of the sublime with the ridiculous, as for instance, putting the head of an Irishwoman smoking a pipe on the bust of the Venus de Milo, made poor Constance sigh, even though she might have to laugh in spite of herself.

"Oh, Ben," she said, "how can you?"

To her, to whom the serious import of beautiful things appealed so strongly, it seemed almost sacrilegious. And yet, when it came to talking about them, Ben seemed to her to be as well if not better posted than she; more familiar with the artistic wonders of the world and more sure in his own mind as to why they were fine. It was quite a revelation to her to hear him dis-

course regarding them, and she noticed that when he became absorbed in what he was saying he dropped his half-bantering tone and became imbued with a fervor of speech that was entrancing.

"How did you come to know about all these things, Ben?" she inquired, as he finished a description of the chief difference between the principal orders of architecture.

"Oh, I don't know. I've picked up a smattering here and there. My master at Hampton had cork models of some of the old Greek and Roman buildings and columns, and I've always been interested in that sort of thing, you know, and asked questions when I've got a chance."

Having shown her valentine to Ben, Constance found less difficulty in screwing up her courage to show it to the rest of the family. Though no one had seen him leave it, the opinion seemed general that Percy White must have been the sender. Mrs. Carleton smiled complacently as she read the verses, and Violet was very much impressed by them. That Constance, without the slightest hint or encouragement, should have received an original poem couched in such highly flattering language, raised her sister decidedly in importance in Violet's eyes, and made her own valentine, which Ethel Davis had sent, appear very paltry and uninteresting. She thought to herself, there was all the difference between them between make-believe and real. Bill, to whom Constance displayed it privately when he came home from the office that evening, was inclined to take a much more serious view of the matter. In his capacity of eldest brother and business man to boot, he



CONSTANCE PICKED UP THE SOURCE OF HER TROUBLES, AND EXAMINED IT CAREFULLY.—*See Page 58.*

was beginning to feel it incumbent upon him to look out for the family self-respect ; accordingly he knit his brows as he read, and inquired, with haughty gravity, when he had finished :

"Who dared send such a thing as that, Constance ?"

"We don't know at all," she answered, faltering a little, and strongly impressed as she always was, by Bill's utterances. She even began to ask herself why she had not continued angry with the sender, according to her first impulse.

Bill noticed the "we," and asked sternly :

"Does mother know ?"

"Yes. She didn't seem to think there was any harm in it."

The remembrance of this was consoling. For, after all, she preferred not to be angry unless it were clearly her duty to be.

Bill scrutinized the valentine disdainfully.

"Harm ? I'd rather cut my right hand off than send such a thing as that to a girl. I wish I knew who sent it ; I'd give him a piece of my mind. I guess I know, anyway, and I mean to find out for certain."

"How ?" asked Constance, timorously. Great as was her confidence in her eldest brother's wisdom, she instinctively shrank from his intervention in an affair of this kind.

"No matter. I'll find out, and when I do, I'll punch his head," he added, working himself up.

"But it may not be the one you think, Bill. Besides, er—er—it wasn't meant to be insulting, I feel sure."

He turned, and regarded indignantly.

"Well, all I can say is I am astonished at you, Con-

stance. Here I am ready to protect you, and go for a fellow who has seen fit to be disrespectful to you, and yet in the same breath you begin to defend him. Just like a woman. Oh, well," he continued, tossing the valentine on the table, "go your own way. Perhaps you won't be so ready to stand up for Percy White when you know him as well as I do."

"You don't even know that Percy White sent it," she answered, with a quiver, but making an effort to control herself.

"I guess there's no doubt about it. It's easy to see through a mill-stone with a hole in it."

"Oh, Bill, how can you?" she burst out, then she gave a great sob, and the tears began to come. "How can you when—when you know how fond I am of you, and—and how much I wish to please you. What have I done? How could I help it? I don't care a straw about Percy White, and if you'd rather not—that is, if you know anything against him—I'll never see him again. Only—only you ought to be just, and not say I was defending him, because I simply said he—or whoever wrote them—didn't mean anything insulting. It's not fair, and you've no right to say it."

To have angered Constance was a novelty for Bill; so was an accusation of injustice, especially one emanating from her. He looked uncomfortable, and, though his manner was still stuffy, he said in a softened tone :

"Well, I misunderstood you, then. I was only advising you for what I thought your good, Con."

"I know that was what you meant," she answered, convulsively, but showing by her effort to smile, that

she was only too ready to exonerate him. "It is foolish of me to cry ; but—but I couldn't bear to have you think me un—unmaidenly, when you know I abhor anything of the kind."

"Of course ; I know you do. I didn't mean that ; I didn't really," and Bill, as he spoke, put his arm about her affectionately, and patted her shoulder.

This was more than an ample atonement in Constance's eyes, and she put up her face to kiss him with a loving look. Bill was conscious of having said all that could fairly be expected of him, without at the same time altering his attitude toward either the valentine or the sender.

Perhaps Constance felt a desire to yield something on her part, for she said, presently, with decision :

"The best thing for me to do is to let Percy White understand once for all that I don't care to see him. I'm sure it's enough for me, Bill, that you know things against him."

Bill shifted his feet uneasily. His sense of justice was again called in question, and this time he himself was the accuser.

"He has too many frills for me, as I've said before," he answered ; "and I don't believe he amounts to much, anyway. I only said, though, that when you knew him as well as I did, you wouldn't be so ready to stand up for him. That isn't saying I know things against him—things you can mention and count on your fingers ; because," he blurted, "I don't."

"Oh !" said Constance, a little doubtfully, showing that she did not quite grasp his meaning.

"It isn't necessary, though, for a man to steal or forge

before you deem him an undesirable person to—to see much of your sister," he continued, with a judicial manner. "What can a girl tell about a man, anyway? I think a brother is in duty bound to caution his sisters against fellows he doesn't fancy. He's too flippant; yes, flippant; that's the word exactly to describe him. If you ask me to name particular acts, I can't, on the spur of the moment; but any one can see he's too flippant. For instance," he added, with a haughty frown, "he called my watch, to-day, a turnip. He came up as I was comparing it with the chronometer in Fern's, the jeweler, and said: 'Holloa, Bill! where did you get that old turnip?'"

"Really! What did you say?"

"I said to him that it had once belonged to my father, who had carried it for a great many years. That ought to have shut him up, if he'd had any decency about him; but he answered: 'I should say, from the look of it, that it must have belonged to Noah.' I felt like pasting him; but you can't hit a fellow nowadays without attracting a crowd. Turnip, indeed! I'd a deuced sight rather have mine any day than the flimsy little thing he carries!"

Whereupon, Bill drew out his timepiece and began to polish it affectionately. Constance looked grave.

"He oughtn't to have said such a thing," she said. "No wonder you were angry."

"Angry?" echoed Bill; and then, remembering that he had admitted as much, he continued: "The moment I had time to think, though, I realized that it made no difference to me what he said." Then, after a pause, Bill added: "I don't wish you to suppose for

a minute, Constance, that his saying so had anything to do with forming my opinion of him. I've thought him flippant from the first ; you must admit that."

" Yes ; you've never fancied him much. And I know you wouldn't let such a thing as that influence you, though I think it was very disagreeable of him."

This was the answer which Constance made ; but, though she valued highly her eldest brother's judgment in all matters, perhaps she was relieved to find that the charges against her admirer were not of a more serious and defined character.





CHAPTER VII.

VIOLET.

"That Mrs. Davis thinks herself some pumpkins," said Mr. Carleton one day, as he watched the lady of the house next door sail majestically across the sidewalk into her carriage.

"What an expression, my dear!" said his wife, who was knitting close at hand, and who raised her eyes instinctively to take a look. But as the children ran forward to have a peep also, she motioned them back, exclaiming: "Ben! Harold! Violet! Go away. What would she think if she saw you staring at her?"

"A cat may look at a king," said John Carleton, but nevertheless he enforced obedience by withdrawing into the background himself.

There were certain matters now in which he yielded to his wife's judgment implicitly, though generally not without some satirical observation by way of protest in the act of yielding, in order to show how foolish or artificial he thought the custom or observance. Still, it had not taken him long to perceive after moving into town that he had moved into a new social atmosphere which was trying, to say the least, to a plain man like himself. In the country he had been his own master, and had

done pretty much as he pleased in all matters without criticism, and hence under a self-congratulatory impression that he knew and did habitually what was what, and that, barring a few convenient habits in which he chose to indulge in the bosom of his family, and which were permissible to a plain man, he was adapted to shine in any society.

Although he grumbled considerably, and professed to make fun of the instructions given him, John Carleton was secretly pleased and proud at the social progress of his family ; for while he was not yet ready to admit that he was second to any man in the honor and courtliness of soul which make up a gentleman, his eyes had become suddenly opened to the fact that he had much to learn concerning the ways of polite society, and that his ambition for his boys would no longer be satisfied were they to grow up to be merely plain men like himself. At the same time while he made every effort to correct his own deficiencies, he had gradually despaired of doing so effectually, and had come to content himself with the conclusion that he would devote his energies to providing the necessary pecuniary means to enable his children to take advantage of the various opportunities for culture offered them. He would continue to the end the plain business man, and his boys and girls should reap the fruit of his industry in the shape of improved manners and a better education.

His wife, on the other hand, who had urged their removal from the country with an eye to these very opportunities, was exercising her wits in feeling a way for the family, with a vivid sense as to how important it was that they should get a good start. It made her

feel almost ashamed of herself that she should be so pleased at the intimacy which had sprung up between Violet and Ethel Davis; and yet it was undeniably gratifying to her, although she recognized that there was much homely truth in her husband's remark that Mamma Davis "thought herself some pumpkins." But then she felt that her husband did not appreciate as she did what a difficult matter it was for a family from the country to make the right sort of acquaintances; and, whatever else might be said of the Davises, they were known to be very exclusive, and to be sanctioned by them was equivalent to an endorsement of respectability. Not that Mrs. Carleton felt that she could claim exactly, as yet, that the family was sanctioned. "Tolerated" was, perhaps, a better word; for beyond a formal call from Mrs. Davis to convey an invitation to the dancing-class, which Mrs. Carleton had returned without finding her neighbor at home, the parents of neither household had met. But at least no impediment had been thrown in the way of the friendship that had originated between Violet and the daughter of the house—a friendship, however, which caused conflicting emotions to Mrs. Carleton—emotions of satisfaction at the refining tendencies which promised to result from it, and of uneasiness at the worldly interests and tastes which, existing already in embryo, seemed likely to be fostered rather than discountenanced thereby. Six months of intercourse with Ethel had already worked a desirable change in Violet's ideas on many points. For instance, she no longer craved the garish colors and startling combinations which she had been led by Maud Logan to believe appropriate to a girl of fifteen. The

uniform appearance of her new friend in the plainest of attire had gradually made clear to her that, until she was grown up, the more simply and quietly a young girl dressed the better. So, too, she had reduced the proportions of her bang, acquired an inclination to restrain herself from trying to attract notice and learned to tone down her hoydenish characteristics in general.

She and Ethel had become inseparable. They walked together and they talked together day in' and day out, without ever seeming to exhaust each other's society. Violet told everything to Ethel and Ethel told everything to Violet without reservation, and if either promised to keep a secret, she always mentally made an exception in favor of her best friend, on the plea that it was merely sharing it with her other self. Ethel found Violet original and diverting, and, if possible, more full of energy and spirit than herself.

"Most of the girls are so languid and namby-pamby," she once confided to her. "They're afraid to call their souls their own, and so they pretend all the time. I hate hypocrisy, and I can see you do, Lettie. That's what first made me take a fancy to you, dear. Why, by the way, do you let them go on calling you 'Lettie?' I abominate nick-names; unless, of course, they're very fetching and unusual; and I'm sure yours isn't, and 'Violet' is such a lovely name, too. 'Miss Violet Carleton' has quite a distinguished sound. If I were you, I'd insist on being called by it."

"I've always detested 'Lettie,' anyway," answered Violet, to whom the suggestion appealed instanter.

"But what I began to say, dear," continued Miss Ethel, "was that I don't believe in pretending to like

things when you don't, and in making yourself different than you really are. There's a girl at our school who says she enjoys Shakespeare's plays more than any other kind of reading. Mamma says I ought to, too, but I don't. I've tried, and I can't. Do you know, Lettie—Violet, I mean, excuse me dearest—I just loathe Shakespeare," she uttered, in a confidential whisper. "There, it's out now. I loathe him. Mamma says it's because I'm too much interested in parties and in coming out," she added, "and that a girl of my age oughtn't to think anything about society or young men until she's eighteen. I'm just tired of trying not to. Won't it be fun, Violet? Papa has promised me a large ball, and he always keeps his word. I do hope I'll have a splendid time. You must make your mother let you come out then, too. You'll be just eighteen—only six months younger ; and half my pleasure would be spoiled, you know, if you waited. What a pity it is for you," she said, despairingly, "that your sister and you couldn't change places. I suppose she'll come out next winter?"

"No; not until winter after. And I doubt if she'll care for it anyway."

"She's perfectly lovely, I think," said Ethel, politely. "But she's quiet; isn't she?"

"Yes, rather."

"I dare say, though, she'll be married before either you or I. That's the way it often happens, I've heard. The quiet girls are apt to be married first. I'm sometimes haunted by the idea that I may die an old maid."

"Then we'll keep each other company; for I shall, I know," answered Violet.

"If we are old maids, we'll live together anyhow," pursued Ethel, ecstatically. "Polly want a cracker?"

"Don't, Ethel; you remind me of Cousin Rebecca Hubbard. She has two parrots and a Skye terrier."

"She's your rich relative, isn't she?"

"Yes. I've often wondered if she ever had an offer. I think she must have been crossed in love. She has a look as though she might have been."

"Poor old thing!" said Ethel.

In personal appearance Ethel was quite unlike Violet. She was a trig-looking blonde, with regular features, blue eyes, exquisite complexion, and wavy, light hair. She was in the habit of saying, regarding herself, that she looked like a wax doll, which was inadequate; for while she possessed all the daintiness of a marionette, such a description made no account of her animation and air of distinction, which enhanced her beauty materially. She was decidedly contemptuous herself, however, as to her own attractions, and chiefly because of her moderate height.

"If I were only an inch and a half taller, I should do very well," she would say with a sigh, as she squared herself before the mirror with the same patrician air that had prompted Mr. Carleton to criticise her mother.

"But you haven't stopped growing yet."

"That's very kind of you to suggest, Violet, darling, but I know better. I'm like papa in figure, and I shall never be any taller; and the worst of it is, I have mamma's coloring and everything but her height. I shall be known as 'dumpy Davis,' and all because of a paltry inch and a half."

What Ethel really meant was that an extra inch or

two would have made her a splendid beauty. As it was, she was by no means short; but her handsome face and aristocratic mien demanded a commanding stature.

She admired Violet, because she was so tall and large.

"If I had your figure," she once said to her, "I'd—I'd—What wouldn't I do!"

Violet laughed, as though this were a jest not worth regarding, but she was pleased, nevertheless; for, what with constant reproof on the score of hoydenish manners from her mother, and humorous allusions to her gawkiness and her big feet and hands, by her father she had grown up with a very humble estimate of her own attractions. She was gratified, therefore, to have so capable a critic as Ethel announce that she had good points. She herself had noticed, for one thing, that in growing tall she had lost undue buxomness. She was straight as an arrow, and her frame was well proportioned. She was vaguely conscious, when looking at herself attentively in the glass, after her return from Ethel's birthday party—a proceeding she had never indulged in before, and which made her feel a little guilty at first—that if somehow her nose and her mouth and her ears could be induced, so to speak, to draw themselves in a fraction, she might be almost good-looking.



CHAPTER VIII.

PERCY, RANDOLPH, BILL : THESE THREE.

It so happened that on the following afternoon, Ethel remarked to her as they were strolling together :

"By the way, I have a compliment for you, Violet. That is, *I* should consider it a compliment. My brother Randolph said last night, after you were gone, that he shouldn't wonder if you were going to turn out a second case of the ugly duckling. That's high praise for Randolph. A back-handed compliment is all any one can expect from him. He picks girls to pieces as a rule. I think it was a very clever description of you," she added, glancing at her companion. "You're growing better-looking every day."

The compliment was, indeed, back-handed, but agreeable, nevertheless, for Violet did not need to be told that she was plain at present. All her hopes lay in the future, and the suggestion that she might some day, in spite of her big feet-and hands and nose and mouth, develop into a swan, made her blush painfully, and confused her so that she had nothing to say—two experiences which were very rarely hers.

Although Percy White had termed Randolph Davis a

"sissy," no one could deny that he was a handsome boy. Unlike his sister he promised to be tall. At present, he was slim and slight, with a suspicion of down on his upper lip. He had, however, beautiful dark eyes, chestnut hair which curled close to his head, and the same air of distinction which characterized the rest of his family, and which in his case was slightly indolent. He was considered to be the living likeness of his uncle Clarence Randolph, a brother of his mother, who had died in early manhood and was habitually referred to, by those who remembered him, as a raving beauty. Although, as Ethel had intimated, he was rather disdainful of the fair sex, Randolph was a great favorite at dancing-school, and any girl of whom he took notice was apt to be all in a flutter. He danced very well, was very graceful in his movements, and confined his attentions to a select few of the maidens who belonged to the class. That she had been noticed to the extent of being likened to the ugly duckling, could not fail therefore to be treasured up by Violet.

By the end of another six months, Percy White had entered college, Bill had been promoted a peg in the office, Ben and Randolph were Sub-Freshmen, and Harrison Fay, at the scientific school, was in a quandary whether he wished to become a naturalist, a civil engineer or a chemist. Similarly the education of the girls was progressing in various directions. It was to be Constance's last year at school and she was deep in languages, history and music. She showed no enthusiasm on the subject of coming out the following winter, but Mrs. Carleton was very well pleased with the effects of association with other young people and of dancing-school

upon her. She took trifles less to heart and seemed less self-absorbed. Ever since their conversation about the valentine, she and Ben had seen more of each other, and they had made an arrangement to read together once a week, which they both enjoyed.

As for Violet, she had suddenly become an imposing young woman, instead of a little girl. She was so tall that when she entered the room one morning with her hair up, even her mother made no demur, beyond remarking to Harold that he was the only baby she had left. She no longer giggled at the slightest provocation, and she declined to answer when addressed as "Lettie." She and Ethel, who had grown no taller, demurely walked the streets together every afternoon, dreaming of the future.

On the 1st of January, Bill was surprised and gladdened by a present from the firm of one hundred dollars, for his services during the past months ; moreover, he was informed that from that date he was to receive a yearly salary of five hundred dollars. The following day he exhibited at home a small blue paper-covered book.

"What is that, Bill ?" asked his mother.

"My bank-book," he responded, with an air of proud complacency.

He felt himself a good deal of a capitalist now. Mr. Sanborn impressed upon him the importance of carefully considering all expenditures, and cited to him numerous instances of fortunes, the foundations of which had been laid by conscientious saving. The old clerk reported him to Mr. Carleton as steady as a watch, which was the highest type of praise in Mr. San-

born's vocabulary ; and certainly Bill continued to be most methodical in all his actions, thrumming away at the piano with the same unflagging perseverance that he displayed in everything else. He clung tenaciously to whatever he had become accustomed to, including his old clothes ; for he shrank in his dress not only from what he stigmatized as frills, but from all innovations in cut or shape or color.

Although he was nearly twenty, he still wore a small, round, gray slouch-hat of the same pattern as when he was fifteen, and when Percy White put in appearance in the winter holidays with a new silk hat, as a complement to the cane, Bill's lip curled disdainfully.

Percy was in great spirits. He was delighted with college, and he gave a graphic account of his experiences there. He had attempted to carry his cane before the eyes of the Sophomores, and a lively war had been the result of it. The entire Freshman class had followed his example, and there had been a perfect holocaust of canes, for the Sophomores had burned them wherever they could find them, and in order to find them had visited the rooms of every Freshman in collage.

"I lost twelve—either burnt or smashed," he exclaimed ; "but I bought a thirteenth, and here it is. It's all over now, though, for the second term has begun, and we are allowed to carry canes and wear beaver hats after this." Whereupon he gave a conscious laugh and glanced at his new hat.

Percy went on to tell that he had been chosen on the crew which was to row against the Harvard Freshmen, and that he was very soon to go into strict training, to have to live on raw meat and go to bed early. He

declared they must all come and see the race, which would be rowed at New London in June.

Violet found Percy vastly improved and asked Constance if she did not think the infantile whiskers which he was beginning to grow were very becoming.

"I don't see," interjected Bill, "that the fellows in college do much studying."

As Bill spoke he reddened slightly. He had noticed the whiskers himself, for his eye was on the lookout for anything of the kind in others, owing to the fact that he had recently detected some fluff on his own upper lip, which had filled him at first with a sort of horror, but had become an object of tender solicitude and constant secret scrutiny. He believed that it could not be long now before some member of the family would call attention to his mustache. While in one sense he dreaded such an exposure, it was not without jealousy that he heard his sister's compliment to Percy's whiskers, which seemed to him not so very much further advanced than his own infant industry.

Constance made no reply to Violet's question, for she was impressed by the soundness of Bill's remark.

"It does seem as if they didn't study at all," she said, with a despondent nod. "Men have such opportunities that I don't see how they can help wishing to study and make the most of themselves."

"And where will he be at the end of four years if he keeps on?" continued Bill, averse to introducing generalities when he had so excellent examples at hand in his mind wherewith to point a moral. "He will have to begin again at the bottom of the ladder, and Mr. San-

born says by that time I ought to be earning from a thousand to twelve hundred dollars a year."

Here was a deduction that consoled the young business man for all the glamour produced by the collegian's talk of contests with Sophomore and boat-races, which, to tell the truth, had sounded decidedly interesting to Bill despite his predisposition to turn up his nose at everything that appertained to a college career. Somehow, however, this announcement regarding his earning capacity did not impress his sisters as much as he expected, though their failure to appear electrified by no means disturbed Bill, for he said to himself that girls had no conception of pecuniary matters or how difficult it was to command a respectable salary down-town. Constance seemed lost in her own reflections concerning the possibilities in the way of scholarship and cultivation which a college course afforded, and Violet, on the other hand, greeted Ben, who came in as Bill paused, with the exclamation that Percy White had just departed, that he was anxious to have them go down to see the boat-race in June, that she was dying to see it, and that Ben must promise to take her.

"He was very sorry to miss you," she added, "and he wants you to call on him. He looks very much improved; he has a tall hat, and is growing whiskers—and they're lovely."

"How can you, Violet!" said her sister with a sigh that was half a laugh.

"I met him as he was coming out of the house," said Ben. "I noticed the hat, and was so much impressed that I must have overlooked the whiskers."

"You can only see them in certain lights," Bill ventured to insinuate, with ghoulish glee.

Interested as he was in Percy, Ben was temporarily absorbed by another matter, which may have prejudiced his eye-sight regarding the whiskers. He had just come from visiting the Shorts, their neighbors on the right-hand side; he had been all over their house, and was bubbling with enthusiasm.

"Oh, Con, you ought to see the pictures and the statuary and the books," he exclaimed; "and they have engravings and photographs of almost everything that's interesting abroad. I could hardly tear myself away; but Mr. Short invited me to come in and look at them whenever I wish; and I mean to, and you must go, too, Con, for you couldn't help being delighted."

"How did they happen to invite you in?" asked Violet, curiously.

Somehow there had been no disposition thus far on the part of the family to seek the society of their right-hand neighbors. Mrs. Short had called immediately when the Carletons first moved into town, but before Mrs. Carleton had been able to return her call, the Shorts had gone to Florida for the winter, and Mrs. Carleton had allowed one thing and another to interfere with her returning it this second winter.

"Oh, Mr. Short and I are very chummy," Ben replied. "He saw me one day watching him cutting his plants, and he scratched acquaintance. I'm very apt to stop for a chat if he's at work outside; and to-day we got talking about sketching, and he asked if I were fond of pictures, and I told him I was; so he invited me in."

"Is he pleasant?" Violet queried again, in the same doubtful tone.

"I like him first-rate. He is interested in all sorts of things. He paints beautifully, and has a studio in the top of his house ; and he photographs, too. He showed me a lot of his photographs, and I think they're better than a real photographer could do, though he laughed when I said so ; and as for his sketches and water-colors, I felt like never touching a pencil again when I saw them. I promised though in a giddy moment," he added lugubriously, "to let him see my scrawls."

"Whom is he talking about?" asked Mrs. Carleton, who had just come in from out-doors and heard the latter part of Ben's eulogy.

"Mr. Short," said Constance. "Ben has been in to visit the Shorts, and is telling us about their beautiful things."

"That woman ! I must return her call. I will do it to-morrow," murmured Mrs. Carleton, in an undertone, and almost a guilty look came over her face as she spoke. "Did you see Mrs. Short, Ben?" she inquired.

"Oh, yes. She was very kind and nice." Violet and her mother instinctively exchanged glances. Could it be that Mrs. Carleton had allowed herself to put off returning Mrs. Short's call because the Davis family had no acquaintance with the Shorts—a fact which Violet had learned from Ethel—coupled with the knowledge that Mr. Short's father had made his money in patent medicines? However that may have been, Mrs. Carleton made a point of calling on her the following day, and she came home quite as enthusiastic as Ben. Her husband was the first member of the family whom she

encountered on her return, and to him she unbosomed herself with a reflective air in this wise :

"Do you know, John, I am afraid city life has its demoralizing side as well as its advantages, and when I see how subtly I, with all my years, can be influenced to do and think things which make me despise myself, I tremble for the children."

"What has happened now? Have you and Ma'am Pumpkins' had a falling out, or have the moths got into the cedar chest?"

"Nothing in particular has happened. I am merely philosophizing in general on dangers of city life; all of which I took into consideration at the time we moved in. The trouble was I counted too much upon the strength of poor human nature."

"Poor human nature! It will be poor human nature in a literal sense if our expenses continue to increase at the present rate. I should say there *was* a demoralizing side to city life!" exclaimed her husband, which showed the direction in which his thoughts were running. "It will be the poor-house, Mrs. Carleton. Look at this bill :

JOHN CARLETON, *Esq.*

To PROF. T. BOSENTA, Dr.

20	lessons in dancing, Miss Constance Carleton	\$25 00
20	" " " Miss Violet Carleton	25 00
20	" " " Master William Carleton	25 00
20	" " " Master Benjamin Carleton	25 00
	Total	\$100 00

Grand damned total, \$100. And for what? To cultivate their heels at the expense of their brains!"

Mrs. Carleton could not help wincing at the size of the bill, even though she had incurred it deliberately and after due reflection.

"It must seem large to you, of course, John," she said, slowly, "and I hesitated for a long time. But what could I do? The three older ones took of him last year, and then they had to go on; for Bill is just beginning to like it a little, and Ben is getting on very well, so that, after this year's practice, he will not need any more lessons; and Constance had to continue, for she comes out next winter, and if she doesn't dance well she won't have a good time. To be sure, I might have kept Violet at home another year, but the child was so anxious to go that I didn't have the heart to refuse her. As to the use of it, John, all I can say it's wonderful what a difference there is in the children's manners since a year ago, and I ascribe it very largely to the dancing-school and their association with the children who go there. Now, for instance," she began again, after a pensive pause, "I have been to call to-day on a sweet little woman—a dear little woman—who is interested in charities, and does, I feel sure, a great deal of good in the world. I could not help liking her, and I shall try to have our girls see something of her, because she will influence them in the right direction; and yet, John, though she is so good and kind and quite pretty, she has no more style than—than—what shall I say?—a clothes-basket. Although she has a beautiful house and plenty of money, she reminded me, in her mode of dressing, of the figures of the women in the Noah's ark the children used to have, and she holds herself all in a bunch. I'm referring to our next-door

neighbor, Mrs. Short, whose call I was returning, and I couldn't help thinking what a pity it was that she should be at such a disadvantage. Now, I take it for granted in her case that it was never impressed on her as a girl that it was worth while to look as well as she could. A little teaching, when she was young, would have made all the difference in the world, I imagine ; and considering how natural and how kindly she is, it seems all the greater pity that she should appear like a guy. The difficulty is," Mrs. Carleton added, with a sigh, "people seem so apt to lose in heart and good feeling in proportion as they gain in appearance and address, and that's what is so depressing. As to the bills, John—"

"Oh, well, you have worries enough without being bothered about them," he interjected, plunging his hands into his pockets. "I'm not bankrupt yet ; and provided the children can be steered clear of nonsense, I guess I can take care of the bills, and I shouldn't wonder, too, if mine were the easier part of the bargain."

That evening Mrs. Carleton frowned over her knitting more than once. In spite of her habitual calm, she had inherited from her girlhood a gift of self-scrutiny which, when it detected a fault in herself, was unrelenting. Moreover, before she went to bed that night, she sang Mrs. Short's praises in such a way as to let Violet see that she did not intend to imitate Mrs. Davis.



CHAPTER IX.

A DISCOVERY.

The acquaintance with the Shorts soon ripened into intimacy, at least so far as Ben and Constance were concerned. Constance and Mrs. Short became warm friends at once. Constance found in Mrs. Short, who was just over thirty, a friend at last whom she thoroughly admired, and Mrs. Short in turn was captivated by the fervid earnestness of the young girl. She and her husband were devoted to each other, but each had a hobby. His was art in its various forms ; he was an absorbed collector of pictures, statuary and books. Hers was philanthropy, and especially whatever related to the higher cultivation of women. Moreover, they were both extremely fond of music and of travel.

The contents of their house were treasure-trove to Constance and Ben, who had never imagined anything of the sort in a private establishment, and Constance was equally amazed and interested by the various charitable and educational undertakings in which her new friend had a part. It seemed to Constance that she had discovered a mission at last. Without being able to define exactly what she wished to do, she had experienced a yearning to make her life of some use, and here,

it seemed was a field that was wholly to her liking. With feverish enthusiasm she applied herself to the preparation of garments for a hospital in which Mrs. Short was interested, and went about assiduously with her visiting poor families.

Mrs. Short, while at work as she called it, was untiring, and never seemed to rest a minute from one end of the day to the other. If she were not visiting the sick or the poor, she was closeted with some kindred spirit investigating an educational scheme or seeking to remedy an abuse, or she was deep in correspondence relative to all of these. Every now and then, however, she would take a holiday, be it for six weeks or as many months, shut her house and run away with her husband to Mexico, Spain, Norway, or wherever the spirit of the art-collector or music-lover called him.

"So you see," she explained to Constance, "I have to utilize every spare moment while I am at home, or I should accomplish nothing."

"It seems to me yours is a perfectly ideal life," Constance said to her, with enthusiasm, one day. "You do so much good."

"Do I?" answered the little woman, with an interrogative smile. "I'm not so sure about that, my dear. Sometimes I feel as if I didn't accomplish any good at all. But," she added, with just the suggestion of a sigh, "I suppose my life is about as full of interest as the life of a woman can be who has no children."

"Oh, yes," said Constance, a little wonderingly.

That the lack of children should be a cause for regret was rather a new idea to her. She had more than once accused herself of hypocrisy when expressions of ad-

miration had been wrenched from her by the mother of some puling infant, and had vowed next time to express her deliberate conviction on the subject, which was that she detested all babies. In this conviction she had the strenuous support of her brother Bill's opinion.

"I can't imagine anything more satisfying," she continued, stifling as unnecessary the sympathy which Mrs. Short's tone had for a moment stirred.

"But you mustn't fancy I don't appreciate what a valuable ally I have had in you, my dear, during the past few months."

Constance looked modest, and uttered a protest which was genuine, in spite of the fact that she was better satisfied with herself than usual.

"Oh, I feel more every day how incompetent I am, Emma." Mrs. Short had asked her to call her by her Christian name.

"And you are likely to go on feeling so until you are as old as Methuselah: you know I'm not quite as old as he yet. But by this date next year," Mrs. Short added, with a sudden change of tone, as though she had detected herself off her guard, "I hope you'll have forgotten all about me and my charities for some time to come."

Constance looked at her in amazement.

"Forgotten?" she echoed.

"I hope so. You'll be a belle in society—a social success by this time next year."

Constance turned crimson, and answered with deliberate disdain:

"Nonsense! I shall never be a—social success. I don't wish to be."

"Nonsense yourself, my dear." Mrs. Short's kindly

eyes were radiant with amusement. "You needn't be a social success if you are bent upon not being one, but you will go out like other girls of your age, and not make a recluse of yourself at eighteen."

Constance felt very much disheartened. She had relied upon the support of her new friend in resisting her mother's programme that she should make her appearance in society the following winter. One or two remarks which Mrs. Short had previously let fall had caused her some uneasiness, but this deliberate onslaught quenched utterly the spark of hope. Still, she was not convinced herself, nor did her mentor's laughing mien seem to Constance in keeping with the seriousness of the occasion.

"Why should I go out if I don't want to?" she inquired, gravely, and finding it difficult to repress the tears that were welling up in her eyes.

"Because you ought to want to. It's natural for a girl of your age to want to."

"But I shall hate it."

"How do you know? You haven't tried it yet."

"What is the use of going out?" said Constance, trying another tack, in answer to which Mrs. Short asked, with an access of eagerness that bespoke feeling on the subject:

"Do you wish to be all your life ill at ease, awkward in your manners and tasteless in dress? The use of going out is to learn how to look and act like a lady, and to become familiar with the ways of the world, so as to be able to appear to the best advantage in whatever circumstances you are placed later."

Constance regarded her with surprise. Such reasons

from a person so apparently indifferent in respect to her own appearance, bewildered her.

Mrs. Short, as though she divined what was passing through the girl's mind, continued :

"I would give a great deal to have had your advantages at your age, my dear. I wasn't so pretty as you are, nor so graceful naturally ; but if I had been able to go to a few balls and parties when I was eighteen, and see how people of good taste behaved and dressed, I shouldn't, at least, be such a dowdy now. Don't protest, my dear, for I know perfectly well how I appear. A woman doesn't reach my age without becoming aware what other women think of her, and other women are almost always right. I'm not complaining. I'm merely stating a fact. My father and mother were people without social acquaintance, who supposed that, provided I grew up good and healthy, nothing else mattered much. I can't change now ; it's too late ; but I don't wish to see you throw away your opportunities. I can say, without fear of turning your head, that you need only a little intercourse with society to develop into a graceful and beautiful woman."

"But I am so much interested in other things," Constance urged, despondently.

"Time enough for them later on. If you find, after a while, that you don't enjoy yourself, you can retire gracefully from the gay world ; and there is no need, in any event, of your being too gay. Don't think I wish you to become a butterfly, Constance. It is because I know you could not become one that I dare to say what I have. It might be the ruin of some girls.

But in your case the danger of ruin lies in your staying at home."

Shortly before this manifesto was issued by Mrs. Short for the benefit of Constance, certain remarks of her husband's had set Ben thinking and speculating. In accordance with his promise, he had shown his sketches to Mr. Short, who, after keeping them for a couple of days, sent in a note, one morning, asking Ben if he would come to dinner, in order that they might discuss them. Ben went gladly enough, but without expectation of praise. It was, therefore, with astonished delight that he heard his patron say, after Mrs. Short had left the dining-room :

"Ben, you've genuine talent for drawing. For one who has never taken lessons, some of your sketches are admirable."

Ben colored and grinned by the way of answer. For a moment, it occurred to him that Mr. Short might be making sport of him, which thought, as well as embarrassment, made him cautious.

"You've a future before you in the artistic line, if you care to develop it."

Ben grinned again. By this time he perceived that his host was thoroughly in earnest, but he could think of nothing to say in reply to so unexpected an announcement.

"You're not to understand by this that I mean you're a genius, and are going to become a great artist right off bang," continued Mr. Short.

"I guess not," said Ben, finding his tongue under the spur of such an imputation.

"You've talent, though—natural talent—that, prop-

erly developed, will enable you to become an artist or architect, and give you an advantage over your contemporaries who become artists or architects without talent."

"But I'm to be a lawyer," said Ben, suddenly appreciating, not altogether without consternation, that Mr. Short was making a very radical suggestion. But the moment he had spoken he realized that he was extremely anxious to become an artist.

"Because you wish to be?" was the pertinent answer. Ben looked almost sheepish.

"Well, I can't say I've thought much about it one way or the other. Father, though, has always said I was to be a lawyer."

"I see. But does your father know you draw?"

"They all know that."

"And don't think much of it, eh?" asked Mr. Short, struck, perhaps, by a deprecatory note in Ben's tone.

"I didn't suppose it amounted to much anyway."

"Well, it doesn't yet."

"Of course not," said Ben.

Mr. Short smiled, and it was at his own expense. Anxious as he was to prevent Ben from deriving a too exalted impression from his words, he had not intended to evoke such complete humility; and convinced now that there was no danger of his being misunderstood, he added, cheerily:

"That is, it doesn't amount to much in one sense, and it does amount to a good deal in another. So far as fulfillment goes, your sketches are what you doubtless intend them to be—mere off-hand, free-and-easy expressions of what you saw or thought; their excel-

lence lies in their promise, and they are full of promises. What's more, my boy, you ought never to be a lawyer, and you may tell your father so with my compliments, with the reason."

Ben's face was a curious study. The ideas suggested were so new and sudden that he felt dumbfounded in spite of his satisfaction.

"I don't know what father would say, I'm sure," he murmured. "I should think, though, it would be very interesting to be an artist."

"Well, you have four years of college life in which to consider the matter. Take your time and come to a conclusion gradually ; there's no hurry about it. While you're making up your mind, though, it will do you no harm to take a few lessons in drawing. We'll take them together if you like ; I know of just the teacher, if you can spare an afternoon or two a week. I forgot, though," Mr. Short added, "you are cramming for college, and have all your time occupied already. We'll put it off until next year, then, only I sha'n't forget it, I warn you. There are lawyers enough already."

"I should like nothing better," replied Ben.

Indeed, he was so pleased at the proposal, that he declared he could spare the necessary time for beginning the drawing lessons at once, in spite of his present labors. But Mr. Short shook his head and said :

"'All work and no play make Jack a dull boy.' You're thin and scrawny enough already, Ben. I want you to have a little flesh left on your bones."

"I'm tough, though," he answered proudly, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

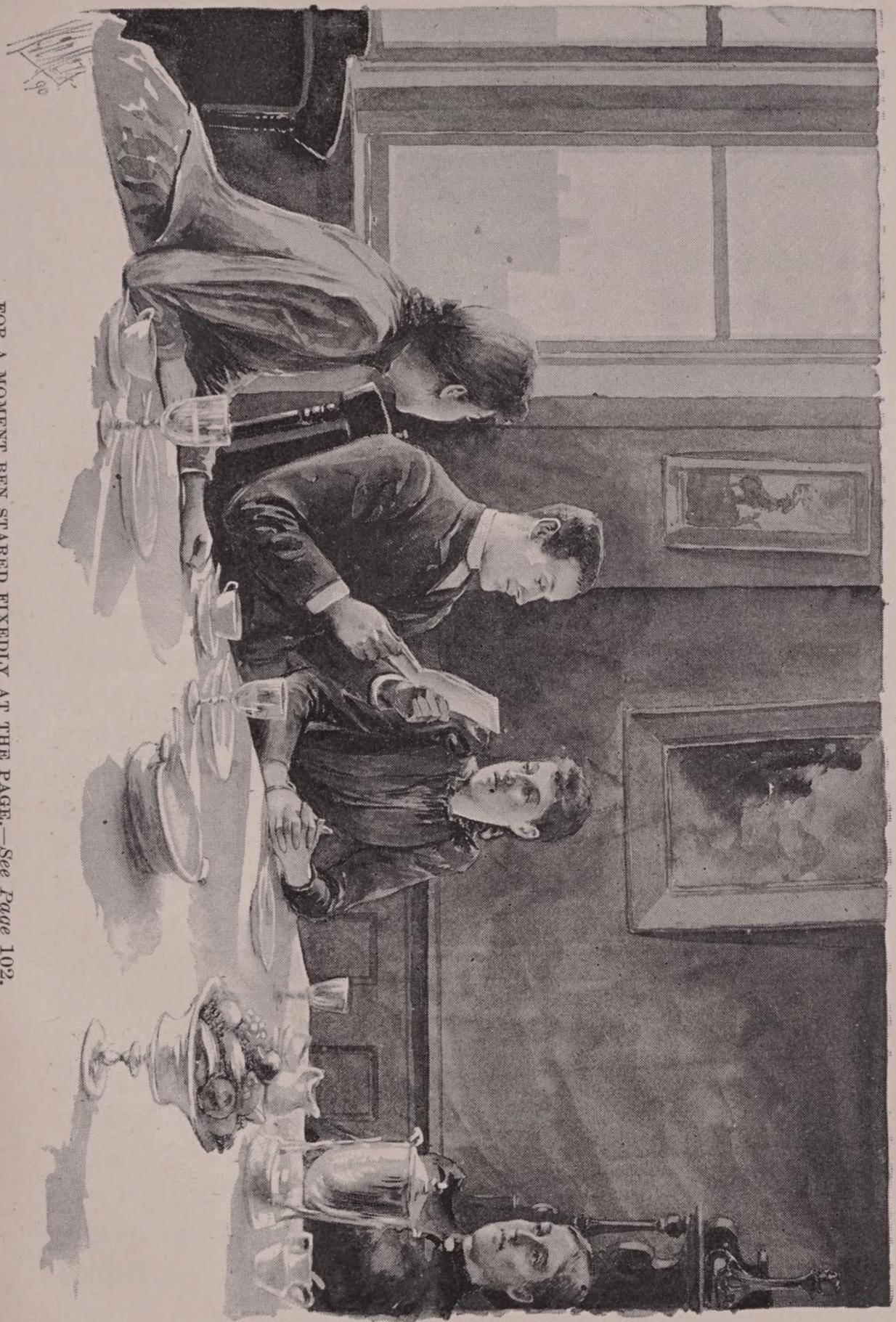
This dialogue gave Master Ben plenty of food for

thought. From that day he necessarily regarded his sketches with a very different eye, and he was surprised to find how interested he had really been in them without acknowledging it to himself. The idea of becoming an artist or an architect took possession of him ; and long before the date of his college entrance examinations, he had come to a definite conclusion that he had no intention of being a lawyer. But remembering that Mr. Short had said there was no need of haste in making up his mind, Ben refrained from broaching the matter to his father. In fact, the only person to whom he spoke of it was Violet, feeling confident, perhaps, that the family determination as to what he was to be would weigh very little with her as against his preference.

"There !" she exclaimed, when he had finished ; "how stupid of us not to have realized that you had talent, Ben. I've always thought your things were awfully funny, but we've taken them so for granted. An artist or an architect ? I think either would be splendid, and much nicer than a lawyer. If you're an artist, I suppose you'll wear a velveteen coat, and go abroad strange countries for to see.

"' And he de-ter-min-ed to go abroad
Strange countries for to see.'

What fun ! I'm in favor of the artist, Ben ; and you must take me with you when you go. I shall pose as the spinster sister of the famous American artist, Benjamin Carleton, and shine by reflected light."



FOR A MOMENT BEN STARRED FIXEDLY AT THE PAGE.—*See Page 102.*



CHAPTER X.

TEN AWFUL DAYS.

While uttering this self-depreciatory conclusion, Violet glanced at herself, not exactly humbly, in her mirror.

"I'm in the dumps to-day, Ben," she remarked, a few moments later. "It has been decided definitely that Ethel is to come out next winter instead of the winter after. They had intended to take her abroad next year and bring her out the following winter; but, you see, she has two grandmothers, both in the eighties, and if anything should happen to either of them she would have to go into mourning for six months at least; so as they are now both perfectly well, and Ethel will be eighteen in February, and there is really no reason why she shouldn't go out, it seems sensible that she should. So her clothes have been ordered. If anything should happen in the meantime, they can go abroad as they intended. Ethel told me this in confidence, and naturally they don't wish it talked about; that is the reason."

"Naturally," observed Ben, with an ironical smile, which made Violet pause a moment and look a little foolish.

"It does sound rather heartless when it's stated in cold blood like that," she continued, "but I think it's sensible; don't you? Ethel is devoted to both her grandmothers. At eighty, though, one can't live forever, you know."

"If they took it into their heads to die in two successive years, she would be in a pretty kettle of fish."

"Do be serious, Ben. I tell you Ethel is very fond of her grandmothers; but entirely reasonable, it seems to me, she wishes to go out while she can. Now you see," Violet continued, intensely, "I'm just crazy to come out at the same time; but I don't suppose there's a chance that mother will let me. I shall be seventeen and a half, though. One thing, however, I'm determined on; I'm going to Ethel's ball. Ethel says it would be spoiled for her if I were not there, and my heart is set on it, even if I have to retire to the nursery for the rest of the winter. You'll speak in favor of it, won't you, Ben?"

Ben promised to do so, declaring that he saw no reason why she should not go to a single party if she wished to. Hence Violet took courage from his support to disclose her scheme to the rest of the family before long. It was evidently regarded askance, and as more of a jest than otherwise; but from the fact that no positive refusal was given by her mother, Violet trusted to bring it to pass by not abandoning it, and at every opportunity she alluded to the project as though it were agreed that she was to go. She even went so far occasionally as to suggest, with a roguish smile, that she intended to come out for good and all. This suggestion was apt, however, to evoke a decided shake of the

maternal head, which seemed to Violet to be an argument that the less radical proposition might possibly be entertained when the time for action should arrive.

What with impending preparations for sending Ben to college and introducing Constance into society, Mrs. Carleton was beginning to feel considerably in a flutter. She had, in the first place, to fit up Ben's college room. With a view to this, she visited Highlands, which was now leased, and, after overhauling the contents of the attic, she unearthed a carpet and sundry antique articles of furniture, that, with a few touches from the upholsterer, promised to do admirably. At the same time she hit upon some crimson curtains which she had forgotten were in existence, and which pleased Ben beyond measure.

"By Jove," he cried, "I shall be awfully swell. They're stunning, mumsy," and he flung his arms around his mother's neck.

His examinations were at hand, and, though he expected to pass, Ben could not help feeling nervous, and his nervousness naturally affected the rest of the family. He was absent two days, and returned in rather a dejected mood, certain as to nothing. In several subjects he thought he had done well, in others he had been unable to answer some of the questions, and there were questions which he had answered incorrectly. He said that every one was agreed that it was a terribly hard examination, and that the papers were so difficult as to be almost unfair. Still, he hoped he had passed. He felt by no means sure, but he hoped he had.

The only one of the household not inclined to be anxious as a consequence of these forebodings was his

mother. She persisted in the belief that he had done well, and would pass with flying colors.

"But, mumsy," Ben would say, almost angrily, "it's absurd to talk like that. If I have passed at all, it's by the skin of my teeth. As to my passing without conditions, there's not a chance of it."

"Well, dear, we'll wait and see," Mrs. Carleton answered, with her placid smile, as much as to say she didn't believe a word of it.

"If Randolph Davis is able to pass, you ought to be," remarked Bill, in a superior manner. This matter of examinations seemed to him decidedly juvenile business, something which he was thankful to escape, and at the same time unworthy of serious consideration from a grown-up point of view.

"It's one thing to ought to do, and another to do," was Ben's reply.

Bill shook his head, and said decidedly :

"I don't know about that, if a fellow means to succeed. It's so in business, anyway."

Some ten days must elapse before the result would be known. By the end of a week, every ring at the door made Ben's heart go pit-a-pat, in expectation that the postman had left the longed-for and yet dreaded letter. He and Randolph Davis talked the examination over time and again, or rather Ben secured Randolph as an auditor, to whom to rehearse his conjectures as to the probabilities of his having passed in this subject and that; for Randolph seemed to have little doubt that he himself had passed, though he was regarded at school as a shirk in his studies, and it had been considered doubtful whether he could get through.

"I slipped up in Greek grammar, and in Greek moods and tenses, and I must have had a close call on algebra," Randolph declared; "but they gave me the one passage in Virgil I really knew, and I spread myself on it. Wasn't it luck? I had luck, too, in the ancient geography paper. I had crammed up on a list of special questions and dates, and there were only three which I didn't know. You have passed, Ben, of course. You must have passed."

Ben shook his head dolefully.

"I slumped completely in ancient geography. Every date went out of my head."

"Well, what's the use of worrying about it, anyway?" said Randolph, lazily. "If I don't pass, it won't break my heart. The governor will pretend to be cross at first, but he doesn't really expect I'll pass, so he won't be much disappointed, and I'd nearly as soon go abroad as go to college. What are you going to do if you don't pass? Going into business?"

Ben realized that he had never considered that alternative.

"I shall try another year, I suppose," he replied, gloomily. "I want to go to college."

"Once is enough for me. I know now as much as I could ever be made to know, I guess."

One morning, just after breakfast, the door-bell rang, and the maid-servant who answered it, brought in a single letter, which she handed to Ben. His eye caught the printed notice in the upper left-hand corner, that, if not delivered in five days, it was to be returned to his college, and his heart leaped into his mouth. His fate was in his hands. All eyes were turned on him as he

tremulously undid it. He would have preferred to run away and inspect the contents apart, but, somehow, he felt that it would be cowardly. With a gasp, he nerved himself and looked. For a moment, he stared fixedly at the page ; his brain was dancing ; he could scarcely believe that he saw correctly. Then a smile relaxed his lips, and looking up, he caught his mother's eye.

"I've passed," he said, contentedly.

There was a general sigh of relief.

"How many conditions ?" asked Constance, earnestly.

"Guess."

"I can't. Tell us."

"One !" exclaimed Violet.

"Two, then," said Constance.

No one else was prepared to increase the number.

"Out with it, my boy. It doesn't matter much how many, since you've passed," said Mr. Carleton.

Ben gave a happy laugh.

"Mother was right," he said. "I got in clear."

The girls clapped their hands simultaneously, and Violet tossed her napkin-ring high in air.

"Without conditions ? Oh, how happy I am !" cried Constance.

"Bully for you, Ben," said Bill, while father and mother exchanged proud, delighted glances.

"That's grand," said John Carleton, emphatically.

"And your mother had confidence in you all along."

"It was a sheer case of crying wolf, and only mother caught on to it," said Bill.

"I don't understand now how I managed it," answered Ben, who was trembling with delight to the verge of tears.

"A great deal better, Ben, than to have felt too confident," said his father. "We must celebrate this victory with a fine dinner, Mary."

"Indeed, we will," replied the mother, wiping away a tear of joy. "And Ben shall choose the dinner."

Here was, indeed, a privilege, of which even the stately Violet was appreciative.

"I know what he'll choose for one thing," she whispered audibly.

"S-h!" exclaimed her father. "Give him a clear field."

Ben was in a decided predicament. So many good things surged into his mind that choice was difficult. But after a moment he proclaimed, decisively :

"I choose roast goose."

There was a murmur of approval.

"I knew he would," said Violet. "Goose is galumptious."

"And apple-sauce," piped in Harold.

"Apple-sauce, of course," said their mother. "Who ever heard of goose without apple-sauce? What else, Ben?"

"Pea-soup, with fried crumbs; salmon and green-peas; cottage-pudding; nuts and raisins."

"Jehosophat!" exclaimed Harold, "won't we be full!"

"And a bottle of champagne to drink Ben's heath with," said the father.

It was a merry party that gathered round the table at dinner time; and Harold's prediction was amply fulfilled. Ben, when toasted, declared that all the credit belonged to mumsy; he believed that her confidence

had bewitched the college examiners into letting him pass, and her health had to be drunk, also. At Ben's suggestion, Mr. and Mrs. Short had been invited, together with Randolph Davis, who had succeeded in passing with three conditions.

"Just the number I expected to get," said Randolph ; "but the queer part of it was, Miss Violet, I was conditioned in Virgil, which I was sure I had done well in."

Randolph had a way of looking out from his dark eyes that made whatever he said seem interesting when he chose to indulge in it, and he was certainly very handsome. Violet found the goose even more "galumptious" than she had anticipated, for which, perhaps, the presence of Mr. Davis, as she called him, was partly responsible.





CHAPTER XI.

A GORGEOUS POSSIBILITY FOR HAROLD.

The first week in January was fixed upon for the Davis ball, and a fortnight before the appointed evening the formal invitations arrived. There was one for the Misses Carleton, which left no doubt that Violet was expected ; and one for Mr. William Carleton. Ben, who was at college, was, as Ethel confided to Violet, considered too young. No Freshmen were to be present, except, of course, Randolph, "who, you know, is really grown-up in his manners," Ethel added.

The adage that a continual dripping will wear away a stone, proved true in the case of Violet's importunity to be allowed to attend her friend's coming-out party. Mrs. Carleton, after the arrival of the invitations, gave her consent. As there were dressmakers in the house busy over Constance, a modest tulle dress could be easily made at the same time for the ugly duckling, and it really did seem rather hard that she should not go, since her heart was set on it.

Mrs. Carleton prided herself on the fact that she had managed to get rid of Harold during this period of household activity. She had appreciated that he would

be dreadfully in the way at home when her entire energies were being taxed to see that Constance was provided with a suitable wardrobe, and it had more than once occurred to her how convenient it would be if she could pack him off to stay with Cousin Rebecca Hubbard; but she would no more have dared to ask her relative to give house-room to a boy of thirteen than she would have questioned her as to the provisions of her will. As she said to her husband, it was a sheer dispensation of Providence that Cousin Rebecca happened to take it into her head one day when she was at the house to suggest it herself.

"That youngest boy of yours looks pale, Mary. He doesn't thrive on city air. I suppose he's like the rest?" she added, with a sniff.

"How do you mean, Rebecca?"

"Well, up to mischief generally. I shouldn't care to be a dog or a parrot and live in the same house with your other children, if you'll excuse my saying so, Mary."

"I can't say that Harold is any better than the others. But I think you judge them severely, Rebecca. They may be thoughtless, but I am sure that no one of them would maliciously torment a dumb creature," answered Mrs. Carleton, with the righteous warmth that a mother feels when her offspring are unjustly censured. Disinheritance or no disinheritance, she could not consent to that.

Cousin Rebecca gave a toss of her head, and remarked, with a slow acerbity :

"I don't know that it makes much difference to a dog and a parrot, whether folks who torment them are

thoughtless or malicious. I guess it means pretty much the same to *them*. But if you care to send Harold to me for a fortnight, I'll warrant he won't come back any worse than he is at present."

Mrs. Carleton had scarcely been able to believe her ears. Ungracious as the invitation was in form, she was afraid afterward that she had veritably jumped at it. Certainly she had lost no time in accepting it, and in her fear lest Cousin Rebecca might change her mind, she had hastened to point out such virtues as she could conscientiously ascribe to her youngest son.

Alas! these were not many. Her baby, as Mrs. Carleton still called Harold, although he was a big boy in trousers, was, as a matter of fact, a more difficult subject to manage than either of his brothers at the same age. He was a handsome little fellow, with curly hair, squarely built like Bill, and somewhat resembling Violet in features. He was bright and original, and he had a faculty of warding off the natural consequences of disobedience and insubordination by the amusing character of his responses when held to an account. The family was too apt to laugh at his peccadilloes, not realizing that he was no longer a mere child, so that he had got into the way of thinking he could do pretty much as he chose without danger of punishment. Mrs. Carleton had become painfully conscious of this, and was constantly saying she would put her foot down and force Harold to obey promptly and exactly; but, somehow, when the time came she was sure to be disarmed either by the plausibility of the excuse which he offered, or the amusing circumstances connected with his ill-doing. Though she suffered some qualms at the thought of

inflicting so undisciplined a monkey on her spinster relation, she consoled herself with the hope that a change of authority might be all he needed to improve his behavior, which did not, however, prevent her from shaking her head now and again at the thought of what was likely to happen in case Cousin Rebecca should not inspire sufficient awe to enforce obedience.

The invitation to Harold was regarded by the others as a distinct manifestation of preference by Cousin Rebecca, and he was cautioned jocularly again and again to conduct himself in such a manner as to make himself indispensable to the old lady.

"I tell you what, Harold," said Ben, "previous to this I've been far and above the favorite. Let's make a sworn alliance. If she leaves it to you you go halves with me, and if she leaves it to me I'll divide with you."

"Don't agree to anything of the sort, Harold," interjected Bill. "One of us has only to mention Ben's sketch of her to Cousin Rebecca, and his goose is cooked. You see, Harold, I'm the only one who has a shadow of a chance. Constance ruined hers, years ago, by upsetting the parrot's cage."

"Which has rankled ever since in Cousin Rebecca's mind," said Violet. "She firmly believes to this day that Con did it on purpose."

"Bill was present the same day, and pulled the parrot's tail," added their mother. "Cousin Rebecca, in referring to the occasion, always speaks of 'those bad children.' I should say that you were all equally out of the race."

"Which leaves a clear field for me," said Harold.

"Who knows, if you behave yourself."

"A monstrous 'if!'" cried Ben. "If I were capitalist, like Bill, I'd stake a handsome sum that Harold returns a ruined community."

"Not a bit of it," said their mother, fondly. "He means to please me by remembering that Cousin Rebecca is an old lady and not accustomed to boys. I feel sure that he will conduct himself like a gentleman."





CHAPTER XII.

EXTRA CREAM LAID.

It had been decided that Bill was to accompany Constance into society. Nor was he averse to this on the whole. The purchase of a swallow-tail coat struck his conservative mind, to be sure, as a radical undertaking, especially in view of the fact that his mentor, Mr. Sanborn, when questioned, announced that he had gone through life without owning one. Still, after the impossibility of going to parties in any other garb had been reiterated to him by both his mother and his father, he consented to be measured, not without secret satisfaction, and, on the evening when the dress-suit arrived, he stole up stairs to his room with the parcel to study the effect. As he surveyed himself in the long mirror which formed the door of his wardrobe, he blushed sheepishly at his own magnificence. The new clothes fitted him like a glove ; the bulky old-fashioned studs—coral acorns set in gold—which his father had fished out of a drawer and made him a present of, struck him as exquisite ; and somehow his mustache, either because it was set off by the white necktie, or because it harmonized so well with the general effect of the new apparel, seemed of imposing proportions.

The family several months before had ceased to be blind to the existence of this hirsute ornamentation. Ben had discovered it, and confided his suspicions to Violet, and they had broached the subject to Bill at the dinner table, only to be answered with a conscious blush and a halting evasion, that were meant to produce the effect of a denial. But time had vindicated the correctness of their diagnosis, and to-day the mustache was both an acknowledged and an accepted fact.

When the invitations to the Davis ball arrived, Mrs. Carleton chanced to remark that they would require to be answered.

"As if I didn't know that, mother," said Bill.

"I am going to answer the girls' invitation ; shall I answer yours at the same time ?"

"No, thank you ; I will answer it myself," he replied, with a toplofty air.

As in all serious matters, Bill took Mr. Sanborn into his confidence, and one afternoon, after every one else was gone for the day, he settled himself under the eye of the old clerk to compose an answer. Both were agreed that office paper with the imprint of the firm was inappropriate. So, too, a sheet of his mother's tinted note paper stamped with her monogram, which Bill had appropriated, was adjudged all very well for a woman, but two small and finicky for a man.

"If you wish my opinion, there's nothing like plain, extra cream-laid letter size," said Mr. Sanborn, exhibiting a sheet of that article, which he had taken from a package in his private drawer. "It's white, and there's nothing printed on it, and you've room enough to say what you've got to say without fear of being crowded,

I wrote my letter of thanks for the watch the firm gave me on a sheet of that, and I wrote on a sheet of it my request for leave of absence when my sister died, which was granted. I don't believe you can do better, William. Here's a new pen that has been used just enough to make it write well."

Bill was well satisfied with this advice, and pen in hand, bent over the broad expanse of paper. The invitation read :

*Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Davis
request the pleasure of
Mr. William Carleton's
company at a small party,
on Wednesday evening,
January the fifth, at nine o'clock.*

Bill hesitated for a moment without beginning ; then he said : "Would you write 'Mr. William Carleton' or simply 'William Carleton ?'"

"Plain 'William,' I should say," answered Mr. Sanborn decisively.

"But the invitation says 'Mr. and Mrs. Davis.'"

The old clerk cogitated a moment.

"That's because there's a lady in the case, which makes a difference," he answered triumphantly.

Bill wrote accordingly, with infinite pains, "William Carleton." Then he stopped and looked up as though a valuable idea had occurred to him.

"I suppose I had better present my compliments!"

"Certainly ! Certainly ! 'William Carleton presents his humble compliments to Mr. and Mrs. Davis, and

begs to acknowledge the receipt of their polite invitation, contents noted.' That's the way I should start it."

"Would you say 'contents noted?'" asked Bill, doubtfully.

"I guess it's usual. It's business-like, any way, and there's no harm in being business-like, whatever you're doing."

"How would this do to finish up with?" Bill asked, after a thoughtful pause, when he had written as directed. "'It will give him great pleasure to be present at their delightful entertainment on the aforesaid evening, to which he is looking forward with keen anticipation.'"

"Bravo! Very nicely turned," exclaimed Mr. Sanborn. "'Keen anticipation' is the very thing. And it's quite enough. I'd sign myself; 'Your obedient servant,' and stop."

"But does it need to be signed? The invitation isn't signed."

Mr. Sanborn took the invitation and studied it attentively.

"It's printed," he said, finally, "and that's why it isn't signed. Never be ashamed to sign your name, my boy; there's no merit in anonymous communications."

"It wouldn't be exactly anonymous, for my name is at the beginning."

"Yes, but who could be sure you had written it if your name wasn't signed to it, unless they knew your handwriting?"

This logic was too much for Bill. He complied with the old clerk's suggestion, and on perusal of the entire composition, he felt he had acquitted himself with credit.



CHAPTER XIII.

VICISSITUDES IN HAROLD'S CAREER.

The chief advantage, in the youthful Harold's mind, of a visit to Cousin Rebecca at Hampton, had been the opportunity that he would have for winter sports. He would be able to coast and skate to his heart's content. Nor was he disappointed, so far as concerned a sufficiency of snow and ice. Cousin Rebecca received him with what was affability for her, and the only restrictions which she imposed on his freedom of action were that he should be punctual at meals and forbear from molesting her dogs, her parrots or her canaries. He was at liberty to amuse himself in other ways as he saw fit. Moreover, Cousin Rebecca set an excellent table, which he did not fail to appreciate; and, altogether, it seemed to Master Harold that he was decidedly in clover. His first letter home emphasized this fact :

“ HAMPTON, DEC. 28.

“ DEAR MOTHER : The coasting is first-rate, and I am having a bully time. Cousin Rebecca has two pugs, two parrots, and three canaries. One of the parrots

cannot talk, but the other says all sorts of things. Cousin Rebecca is a brick, and has splendid things to eat. I met Dr. Fay in the street yesterday, and he gave me an orange. Give my love to father and all the others, and with a kiss for you, dear mother, I am

Your affectionate son,

HAROLD CARLETON.

P. S.—One of the canaries has laid an egg.”

Two days after this letter was written, a thaw set in. As a consequence, when Harold returned, just before tea-time, he was very wet—so much so that he could not get his rubber boots off ; and when the maid-servant, in whose charge he had been put, succeeded in starting one of them, a shower of slush was emptied upon the carpet.

“That’s nothing,” said Harold, by way of appeasing Cousin Rebecca. “I’m often a great deal wetter than that at home.”

“Well, it can’t be good for you to get so wet, and it mustn’t happen again,” answered Cousin Rebecca, with a wheeze. She was a very stout lady, and when she was agitated, she was apt to wheeze. “If you were to be laid up sick, what would your mother say ?”

Harold received the reproof in silence, but it could not have produced much impression on him, for on the following day he returned late for tea in rather a worse condition. Cousin Rebecca waylaid him in the hall, through which he was endeavoring to scurry unobserved.

“You are late for tea, Harold. What have you been doing ?”

“Building a dam, ma’am.”

“You look wet through.”

He certainly did, and though he uttered a faint "Not very," his words were belied by the gurgling sound which his boots emitted when he attempted to move. Cousin Rebecca heard this and cried :

"Stand where you are ! Don't stir a step ! Jane!"

When the servant appeared, she pointed to the culprit with an air of severity and said :

"Take him out into the kitchen and remove his wet things. When his rubber boots are dry you may bring them to me."

Harold followed the girl meekly, but just as he was leaving the hall, turned with a fascinated air and asked :

"What are you going to do with my rubber boots, Cousin Rebecca?"

"Lock them up where you won't get them. To-morrow you will stay in the house, Harold."

Here was a punishment that rankled deeply, especially when on the morrow a fall of snow had supplied material for new dams. Harold pressed his nose against the window-panes in dire discontent. He realized from Cousin Rececca's set expression of countenance that it would probably be useless to try to beg off; still, at length, he said humbly :

"I'll promise not to wet myself if you'll allow me to go out, and I'll come home in time for tea."

"Catch *me*!" was the laconic answer.

"Naughty boy!" exclaimed the talking parrot, pertinently.

"That bird has rare intelligence," murmured the old lady.

To be insulted by a parrot in addition to being impris-

oned was galling, and Harold vowed to himself that he would get out somehow.

Not content with locking up the rubber boots, Cousin Rebecca had taken the precaution to secure his other boots also, so that he was reduced to slippers. After the noonday dinner it was customary with the old lady to take a nap—forty winks, as she called it. When she had dropped off as usual, Harold realized that whatever he purposed to do must be done at once. If only he knew where she had hidden the key of the closet where his boots were ! Probably in her pocket ; but he had not the hardihood to investigate, especially under the eye of the parrot, who would be sure to cry : “ What’s your name ? St-t-boy ! ” or give vent to some other compromising signal.

Suddenly, however, his face lighted up. An idea had come to him that was eminently simple and satisfactory. Emil Logan, a playmate of his own age, lived only a short distance off on the opposite side of the stream, close to where the boys would be building their dam. Why not glide out of the house in his slippers, and foot it as fast as he could to Emil’s, tell Emil the circumstances, and borrow a pair of boots ?

Why not, indeed ! Cousin Rebecca was snoozing peacefully, and Jane was in the kitchen. His hat and his coat were in the front entry, and he had merely to slip out of the house and take to his heels. Moving on tiptoe, he turned the handle of the sitting-room door, but was brought to a stand-still by the croaking voice of the parrot, which just then took it into his head to cry strenuously :

“ Naughty boy ! ”

Harold felt all of a tremble ; but the old lady did not stir. He could not refrain from shaking his fist at the bird, though, at the same time, he said appealingly :

"Poor Polly ! Pretty Polly !"

"Oh, I know *you*!" answered the sagacious parrot.

But Harold was gone. In a jiffy he had on his hat and coat and was in the street. The sidewalk was slippery as glass, for the snow of the morning had melted and it was now freezing. Unfortunately, he decided to cross the street at once instead of keeping on the same side until opposite Emil Logan's. With a big bound he nimbly sped through the slush of the highway without seriously submerging his slippers, and skipped the gutter successfully. Instinctively he glanced up to see if he were observed, and to his horror descried Jane at an upper window. Even then he might possibly have escaped her notice, had he not, in his eagerness to hasten, slipped, tottered, slipped again and pitched over the curbstone on to his back. He was unhurt, but in rising to his feet he found himself ankle-deep in slush, which was a trivial matter in his eyes compared with the disgust of knowing that he was discovered. An emphatic knocking at the window-pane notified him of this as he turned to flee, and a moment later the voice of Jane crying : "Master Harold ! Master Harold ! Oh, where are you going, Master Harold, in them slippers ?" rang after him down the street.

The hubbub awakened Cousin Rebecca, to whom Jane, half laughing, half crying, imparted the appalling news.

"He's that smart, ma'am, there's no accounting for what he'll do," she added.

"I'll make him smart when I get him in the house again. Is Michael about?"

"Yes, ma'am, he's in the kitchen, just after finishing his dinner."

"Send him to me."

Michael was Cousin Rebecca's choreman and coachman, a burly Irishman six feet tall and proportionately broad. When he appeared in answer to this summons, his mistress said with a wheeze :

"Michael, you will find Master Harold and bring him home at once, even if you have to carry him." The man grinned and touched his finger to his forelock. Fifteen minutes later he re-entered Cousin Rebecca's presence with a bundle in his arms, which he seemed to carry as easily as a kitten. The bundle was Harold. His captor had come upon him just as he emerged from Emil Logan's house, provided with boots. Fortune was against Harold, for he had closed the door, and Michael barred his passage down the steps. He had made one desperate effort to dodge past him, but a pair of muscular arms held him tight, and he was borne away, struggling like a young chimpanzee.

Solitary confinement in bed for twenty-four hours, on bread and milk, followed. Harold entered the breakfast-room on the second morning with a crestfallen smile. He appreciated that he had got only what he deserved, and that his adversary had triumphed over him. He felt sore, but he had no real ground of complaint.

"We've missed you!" shrieked the parrot, as he undid his napkin.

"We'll let bygones be bygones, and start fresh, Polly," said the old lady, magnanimously.

"Amen!"

Harold devoured his breakfast in silence. Now that he was in contact with the work-a-day world again, he found himself overcome by the pathos of his circumstances, and his eyes filled with tears. He felt bitterly against the parrot, against Cousin Rebecca, against Jane and Michael, and discontented with the world at large. He gave a gulp of distress, and then suddenly he thought of the orange which Dr. Fay had given him. In the excitement of the past few days, it had slipped his memory. He would eat it now, and it seemed likely to go far toward reconciling him with humanity.

Accordingly, he looked into the china closet, where he had carefully concealed it on the shelf. It was not there. He examined anxiously to right and left, but there was no sign of an orange. Where could it be? Who had dared to touch it? With rising choler, he vainly pulled out and peered into each of the drawers that were beneath the shelf. Some one had taken it; that was clear. But who?

He emerged from the closet fiery with indignation.

"Who has taken my orange?" he demanded imperiously.

Cousin Rebecca looked at him a moment without comprehension; then a faint flush took possession of her cheeks, and she echoed, falteringly:

"Your orange, Harold?"

"Yes; the orange Dr. Fay gave me. I put it in the closet three days ago, and some one has taken it."

"I am very sorry, Harold, but I'm afraid I was the guilty person. I didn't know it was yours."

"Give it to me, then," he commanded, not appreciating the real truth.

"I have eaten it, my dear," she answered with the suspicion of a smile.

"Eaten it!" he roared. "Eaten my orange?"

"I had no idea it was yours. You shall have another," she hastened to add, soothingly.

But if Harold heard her at all, the words made no impression. The enormity of the offense had overwhelmed him for a moment, and now that he realized that it had really been committed, he stood struggling to find language suitable for the occasion.

"You're a—" he exclaimed, and stopped; and then with a sudden burst of fierce resentment, as though the appropriate epithet had come to his relief, he continued: "You're a pouty swill-barrel!"

Cousin Rebecca, who, in the consciousness of guilt, had been inclined to accept as her due a reasonable amount of invective, sat bolt upright, speechless at first.

"You're a pouty swill-barrel!" he repeated, triumphantly, evidently content with the first fruits of his imagination.

"Amen!" screamed the parrot.

"And you're another!" retorted Harold, glaring at the bird.

"Naughty boy!"

It is reasonable to assume that the parrot would not have had the last word in this debate except for Cousin Rebecca's interference. She sprang at Harold with an alertness that seemed incompatible with her corpulence,

and grasping him by the head and shoulders, shook him viciously.

"You bad fellow!" she cried; "I'll teach you not to use expressions like that! How dare you? Pouty, indeed! If your mother had done for you what I am doing now, you would thank her when you're grown up. But it may not be too late to whip a little sense of decency into you."

As Harold explained at a subsequent date, he had no idea that Cousin Rebecca was so strong. Struggle as he would, he was unable to escape from her clutches until he had undergone a thorough trouncing; and when at last she released him with an exultant "there!" he was fit only to drop upon the floor in a heap and blubber convulsively. She herself sank exhausted upon the sofa, leaving the pæan of victory to be chanted by the poll-parrot.

We may reasonably assume again that if the natural course of events had not been interrupted, Master Harold would probably have been summarily packed off to his home next morning, but, fortunately or unfortunately, as it may have been for all parties concerned, the culprit awoke next morning covered with a rash.

"A light case of scarlet-fever," said Dr. Fay.

"That comes of running out-doors in thin slippers in mid-winter," observed Cousin Rebecca.

"Scarcely; you can't cook up scarlet-fever in twenty-four hours," said the doctor. "He probably took the germ into his system before he left town."

This was comforting to the old lady, for the announcement that the boy was really ill had filled her with dismay and qualms of self-reproach. If running out-doors

practically barefoot could not evoke a fever, neither surely could a salutary castigation. It pleased her to think that the illness could in no sense be laid to her door. Undoubtedly, Harold had contracted it before he left home. So she stated in notifying his mother of what had come to pass.

Mrs. Carleton, of course, came hurrying out by the first train, ready to take possession of her baby and carry him off, but, rather to her surprise, Cousin Rebecca demurred.

"Take him, if you are set on it, Mary, but I guess he'll be less trouble sick than when he was well. I'm not afraid of catching the fever."

"It's very kind of you to offer to keep him," said Mrs. Carleton, tempted grievously by the dire consequences that must result from Harold's return home, for the Davis ball was to come off on the morrow, and with scarlet-fever in the house Constance would not be able to go anywhere for several weeks.

The arrival of the doctor settled matters. He said that the patient must not be moved. Thereupon, Mrs. Carleton declared that she would remain to nurse him. But here again she was opposed by Cousin Rebecca, who did not seem to take kindly to the idea of another inmate.

"There's no better nurse than Jane," said the old lady, "and you've your own house to look after, Mary."

This last statement was certainly true. It would have been a grievous disappointment to Mrs. Carleton not to see her daughters dressed for their first ball, to say nothing of the thousand and one points connected with their toilets that needed her immediate supervision;

so she suffered herself to be overruled on condition that she should be informed every day how Harold was getting along, and telegraphed to in case of the slightest change for the worse.

Cousin Rebecca made no reference to the trials which she had undergone during the past few days, even when Mrs. Carleton expressed the hope that she had not found him very troublesome. To this she responded merely by an ambiguous grunt, which rather reassured the fond mother than otherwise, in view of her relative's habitual freedom of speech. Indeed, Mrs. Carleton ventured to announce on her return home that she was inclined to believe that Harold had quite won Cousin Rebecca's heart, adding :

"She hadn't a word to say against him, my dears."





CHAPTER XIV.

THE DAVIS BALL.

The evening fixed for the Davis ball, which had been looked forward to for so long was come at last. Even Bill had recovered from the fit of gloom in which he had been thrown by the ridicule accorded to his letter of acceptance, and was prepared to enjoy himself. In a moment of confidence Ethel had informed Violet concerning the contents of the letter, and she had returned home in a convulsive state and thrown herself upon the sofa with a handkerchief stuffed into her mouth. Bill had had cause to be grateful that Ben was at college, and that he had only one tormentor to deal with ; for Constance, though excessively amused in spite of herself, had endeavored to shield him as far as possible from the mirth of the household, and of Violet in particular. What had rankled in Bill's mind especially was the imputation of greenness from having signed his name to an invitation couched in an impersonal form ; and for the same reason his blood ran cold whenever an allusion was made to "contents noted." That he, of all persons, who prided himself on doing everything correctly, should have made such compromising slips, was a rude shock ;

and one of the chief consequences of his chagrin had been a sudden modification of his worship for Mr. Sanborn. There was a limit after all to the wisdom of his mentor, and it would not do for the future to trust implicitly in the judgment of that exemplary personage in certain matters.

"Sanborn!" ejaculated his father, when, at the time Bill was brought to bay, he had cited almost triumphantly the old clerk's opinion. "Why, I don't suppose Sanborn was ever at a party in his life, and knows much less how an invitation to one should be answered."

But even Violet's attention had been too much occupied by her interest in the great event to make the most of her opportunity to gibe at her eldest brother. Her thoughts were busy from morning to night with wondering what it would be like, in which occupation she had a thoroughly sympathetic spirit in Ethel, only that Ethel, as Violet declared, had begun already to regard her as a little girl. If only she were really coming out, instead of being suffered to go just to a single party, how happy she would be. Still, she was determined to make the most of her single occasion.

Nor was Constance lacking in interest, now that the affair was really at hand. Timorous, fluttering, but undeniably charming and graceful did she appear as she entered the drawing-room to show herself to her father on the evening in question. Close behind her came Violet, brilliant with beauty of another type, and in their wake followed the proud mother and the almost equally proud Sophia armed with cloaks and wraps.

John Carleton sprang up from his newspaper.

"Bless my heart," he exclaimed, "how lovely you

look, my dears. Stand side by side and let me have a view of you,"

Laughing and blushing, the sisters ranged themselves side by side to undergo the desired scrutiny. They were dressed alike in white tulle, save that, acting under maternal orders, the dressmaker had endeavored to impart to Violet's attire a cut appropriate to a girl of sixteen, rather than to a full-blown maiden. But they looked practically the same age, and yet essentially distinct in type. The delighted father scarcely knew which to admire the more. In the countenance of each was discernible a natural consciousness of her charms, which betrayed itself, in the case of Constance, by the downcasting of her big brown eyes, and in Violet's by the beaming serenity with which she met her father's gaze. Meantime, the mother and Sophia pranced about in their rear, on the alert for rents or wrinkles, giving a dab here and a pull there at the gauzy skirts of their idols.

To complete the group, Master William sauntered into the room at this juncture with a nonchalant air, as though there were nothing unusual in his appearance. But there was a general exclamation as he entered. Instinctively his father performed a salaam after the Oriental fashion, and his sisters curtsied to the ground, while, before Bill could recover from the embarrassment created by this adulation, his mother had seized him and led him towards the lamp, exclaiming:

"You're all covered with lint. Sophia, where's that whisk?"

"Am I?" said he, anxiously, though it nettled him that a flaw should be detected in his toilet. "I guess it

must have come from the towel. I put it round my neck while I brushed my hair."

"But why didn't you take your coat off?" asked his mother, as she plied the brush vigorously around his shoulders.

That, apparently, had not occurred to Bill, who looked a little sheepish in consequence of the laughter at his expense which followed.

"No matter, Bill," said his father. "You're a thoroughly magnificent creature as it is. What would Mr. Sanborn say if he could see you now?"

This reminder of a tender subject evoked a gurgle of mirth from Violet and brought fresh roses to Bill's cheeks. He was glad to transfer attention from himself by admiration of his sisters.

"You look stunning, Con; and you, too, Violet," he said, genuinely.

The girls looked pleased; and by way of letting Bill feel in turn that his appearance was approved of, John Carleton remarked, in a tone of satisfaction:

"Those are my old studs you have on, I see."

Bill glanced down at his bosom, on which the coral acorns stood forth predominantly.

"Yes, sir; and I think they set my shirt off very well."

Violet, who had gone to peep out from behind the window-shade, cried, excitedly, at this moment:

"Oh! they have an awning."

So it appeared. A covered passageway of striped material from the door of the Davises' house to the curbstone had been erected, and a policeman stood on guard to superintend the carriages. It was a little early



LAUGHING AND BLUSHING, THE SISTERS RANGED THEMSELVES SIDE BY SIDE.—See Page 127.

yet ; no one had apparently arrived. Ethel had urged the Carletons to be sure to come among the first.

"At what time does the party begin?" asked Mr. Carleton.

"The invitation says nine," replied his wife. "I fancy, though, that that means nearer half-past."

"Ethel says she didn't expect people generally would come until about ten," said Violet, "but I think we might go at a quarter before."

"What's the sense of asking people to come at nine and not expect them until ten?" inquired the father.

The necessity of answering this question was obviated by the ringing of the door-bell, which naturally engrossed the attention of everybody.

There was a momentary confabulation at the door between the servant and whoever it was, and immediately after Sophia entered the room with a green bandbox, which Mrs. Carleton, not divining its contents, rose to receive.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but it's for Miss Constance."

A tag attached to the box was addressed unmistakably to Miss Constance Carleton.

"I know what it is," cried Violet, clapping her hands ; "it's a bouquet."

"Yes, that is what it must be," said Mrs. Carleton, with quiet delight, while Constance tremulously began to undo the string.

"Bother ! Cut it !" exclaimed Violet. "I'm crazy to see what's inside. Where's your knife, Bill?"

"Let her alone," said Bill, who sympathized with a knot-untangling spirit, and whose face wore a mysterious expression.

For a few moments of suspense Constance picked at the knot with her fingers ; then, with a sudden impetuous "Bother, too, I say !" forced the string over the edge of the box and managed to free the cover. On top was a quantity of gauzy paper, the removal of which revealed a splended mass of carmine roses.

"How lovely !" cried Violet.

"Lovely !" echoed their happy possessor, as she removed the bouquet from its nest and held it up to be admired. In the cup of one of the largest roses she perceived a morsel of an envelope, which proved to contain a card.

*With the compliments of
Mr Percy White.*

read the others over her shoulder.

A short pause followed.

"Very thoughtful and polite of him," murmured Mrs. Carleton.

"They are heavenly !" said Violet, bending down her face to inhale their fragrance. "I shouldn't wonder if he were to be there!"

"Oh, no," said Constance ; "he told me the other day that he couldn't get leave to come from the college professors. It was very nice of him, though, to send these," she added, fingering shyly some sprays of fern that fringed the borders of the bouquet.

No one noticed that when the flowers were disclosed Bill had given a start and looked bewildered, and that while they were being admired he had remained completely glum. When now the door-bell rang for a second

time, he made a movement as though he intended to go out into the hall ; but he thought better of it, and sat gloomily down on the edge of the sofa.

"More flowers, perhaps," Violet had cried, on hearing the bell.

"And I hope they're for you," said Constance, who stood smelling of hers, with a happy blush on her cheek that was very becoming.

"Violet's turn will come next year," said their mother.

"It is another bouquet ! It is ! It is !" joyfully cried Violet, who had run to peep into the hall and now held open the door for the delighted Sophia to enter with a second florist's box.

"Another for my young lady."

"Who *can* have sent them ?" exclaimed Violet. Now that Percy White was accounted for, she could not think of any other likely person, which naturally increased her excitement tenfold.

Constance made short work of the knot this time. With a plunge of her hand into the box she brought forth another nosegay, which was veritably one ; for, instead of being composed of roses only, like its predecessor, the new bouquet was radiant with garden flowers of every description—mignonettes, marigolds, heliotropes, peonies, dahlias, tulips and pinks.

There was another pause, unbroken by the feminine portion of the family, but John Carleton cried out with genuine admiration :

"Mercy on us ! There's a bouquet that suits my eye. Bravo, Constance ! What's the fellow's name ?"

"There is no card nor name that I can see, father," answered Constance, who had been searching the box.

"They are lovely, too, and so sweet—sweeter to smell than the roses even."

"Lovely; but they're sort of queer, aren't they?" murmured, in her mother's ear, Violet, who seemed let down a peg or two in transport at the sight of them. "I wonder who sent them."

"Never look a gift horse in the mouth, my dear," was Mrs. Carleton's answer. "I think the flowers are very pretty."

"Now, that's what I call taste,"-continued her husband, who, deaf to the other comments, was examining the bouquet critically, with his head on one side and his hands in his pockets. "There's a model for you, young man, when your time comes to send a nosegay to your sweetheart," he added, addressing Bill, who was still seated on the edge of the sofa and listening in silence to the different observations. His face lighted up in response to these cheery words, and he stepped forward to look, but said, in what was a mournful tone:

"It isn't half so handsome as the other."

"There's where I don't agree with you, my boy. I was born a country lad, and I know a good thing in flowers when I see it."

"I agree with Bill," said Violet. "It isn't half so handsome."

She was about to continue, but the further expression of her opinion was interrupted by her mother's pressing her hand.

Mrs. Carleton had suddenly divined the truth from the expression on Bill's face, and with swift good sense she said to her husband:

"I think I know the culprit, John. You have been singing the praises of your own son."

Bill turned the color of one of the peonies as all eyes were turned on him.

"Yes, it was I, since you've guessed," he stammered. "I wasn't going to say anything about it, though—for—for—I didn't know you'd have two, and I thought it might please you, Con, not to go without any to your first party."

"Oh, Bill, did you send it? How kind of you! And I never guessed it at all," cried Constance, eagerly seeking his embrace to the imminent peril of her hair. "I prefer it fifty times to the other, because you sent it," she added, surveying his gift with genuine rapture, while her father capped her gratification by exclaiming:

"It does credit both to your heart and to your head, my son."

"Indeed it does," said his mother, proudly; and Violet sought to counteract the effect of her frankness by saying:

"It is very sweet of you, Bill."

So much good will did much to restore his equanimity, and though he still looked ruefully at the rival bouquet, Bill was able to answer without bitterness:

"I shall know better next time. I meant it to be handsome, anyway. But if you'd prefer not to carry it, Con, leave it at home, and I sha'n't feel in the least hurt."

"Not carry it? I should be broken-hearted if it were left at home. It is lovely, Bill—it really is. I know what I'd rather do," she added eagerly. "Here Violet, I'll let you carry the other one, and I'll take only Bill's."

But Violet shook her head, and answered with a laugh :

" You don't suppose I'd carry a bouquet that was sent to somebody else, do you? Besides, what would Percy White say if he saw you without it? "

" If he asked where it was, I should simply say that two were rather heavy to carry, and that naturally I preferred to take the one my brother sent me."

" Nonsense! " exclaimed Mrs. Carleton. " You would never say anything so stupid, my dear."

" Hark! The music is beginning." cried Violet, ecstatically.

All listened, and true enough they could catch the strains of a piano, a violin and a cornet in lively co-operation. Just then two carriages came rumbling by and halted. Violet peeped behind the window-shade again.

" People are beginning to come; we ought to go."

" Five minutes of ten o'clock! I should think so," said John Carleton, emphatically. " I should call it an hour too late."

" I'm ready," said Constance, gathering up her flowers, while her mother and Sophia proudly swathed her in her new cloak trimmed with swan's-down.

" I do hope you'll all have a lovely time," said Mrs. Carleton, as she followed the trio into the hall. " Have you your gloves, Bill? "

" Yes, mother."

" Oh, I've forgotten my fan!" cried Violet, which gave an opportunity to Sophia to rush up the necessary three flights and return, panting, with that missing article.

" Now be moderate, my dear," said Mrs. Carleton, as

she handed the fan to her second daughter. "Remember you're not out yet, and should keep in the background."

"Yes, mother dear, I'll be a perfect saint. Ready, Bill?"

"I like that, when we've been waiting all this time for you."

"And don't forget to hold your head up while you're dancing, Constance."

"No, mother," Constance answered, and then looking back from the threshold over her shoulder, with a smile that was almost piteous, added, "I'd give anything if I could stay at home."

"Away with you," said Mrs. Carleton, pushing her gently into the vestibule after the others, and closing the front door.

When the two girls were ready to go down to the ball-room, they found Bill in a gloomy frame of mind. He had managed to tear a big rent in one of his kid gloves while putting it on. Unfortunately he had brought only this one pair, so there was nothing to do but to go down as he was. Constance tried to comfort him, by assuring him that it showed very little, but he could not help feeling uncomfortable, especially as he had perceived that his shirt studs, which he had fancied so exquisite, were very much larger than those worn by the other young men who were taking off their things at the same time as he. Theirs were mostly small gold studs, comparatively inconspicuous, and he thought he noticed several of them glance at his shirt front and suppress a smile.

Not a great many people had arrived as yet. Mrs.

Davis and her daughter stood near the foot of the stairs receiving. As Ethel caught sight of the Carletons she beamed with pleasure, and, after welcoming Constance, poured a flow of almost hysterical prattle into Violet's ear. She said she was so glad Violet had been allowed to come, declared that she felt frightfully nervous, wondered if people would have a good time, assured her that she looked perfectly lovely, all in one breath, and then whisked about to greet a new-comer. The next moment the Carletons, dazed and uncertain what to do or where to go, were swept along to make room for others. Appalled at the idea of standing alone, they drifted instinctively into the flank of a bevy of young women who, like themselves, seemed waiting for something to happen. Here they endeavored to collect their senses, which the music, the lights and the unfamiliar scene had scattered. Violet, who had taken in scarcely a word of Ethel's chatter, now scanned her for the first time with intelligent eyes. She seemed to her a year older; she was superbly dressed, and was fairly weighed down by her bouquets, which Ethel had whispered were nine in number. Once having recovered her self-possession, Violet began to look about her with zest, but Constance felt herself painfully ill at ease. She was conscious of blushing profusely, and now and again to conceal her face, she buried it in the tops of her bouquets. As for Bill, he hovered about his sisters' skirts, divided between the wish not to desert them and the wish not to be the only one of his sex among so many girls, for there was a separate cluster of men on the other side of the room near the door. His spirits were oppressed by the consciousness of the rent in his glove,

which he labored to conceal, and the unpleasant fear that his shirt studs were peculiar. He would have liked heartily to go home, but with Constance and Violet to be looked after, that, alas! was out of the question.

The music, which had ceased for a few minutes, now recommenced, and the notes of a lively waltz induced dancing. Couples from the hall and the room beyond made their appearance, and some of the men about the door chose partners from the bevy of unoccupied girls to which Constance and Violet had attached themselves; so that, by virtue of the gaps this occasioned in the phalanx, the Carletons were left standing with only three or four others. The interest inspired by the waltzers and the dresses took Violet's mind off herself; besides, not being out, she hardly expected attention, and was content to be merely an observer. But Constance, who was aware that it was considered mortifying to stand against the wall without a partner for any length of time, felt herself growing more and more uncomfortable every minute. Just as she was reflecting that if this lasted much longer she should sink through the floor, she became aware of a familiar voice in her ear, bidding her good evening and asking for the favor of a waltz. She blushed profusely again, this time with pleasure; and before she quite knew what she was doing, found herself being whisked around the room, with her hand resting timidly on Percy White's shoulder, and doing her best to hold her head up in conformity with her mother's request. At first she felt so shy that it was almost a torture; then, by degrees, it began to be almost fun. Round and round they went,

and every moment she gained in courage and enjoyed herself more, until at last, when her partner landed her panting in an unoccupied corner, she was radiant at her success. The next moment, the thought that she must thank him for the bouquet drew largely upon her stock of courage ; and she realized that the tone in which she said, "It was very kind of you to send me these lovely flowers," was uttered with a perfunctory, jerky gasp that was quite different from what she intended.

But Percy did not seem to notice her *gaucherie*. He bowed gallantly and said that he was very glad that she was pleased with them, and she noticed that he seemed at the time to be looking at her other bouquet as if he were wondering who had sent it to her. At first she thought of telling him that it was from Bill, but she concluded, on the whole, not to.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Mr. White," she said gaily, happy that the burden of thanking him was off her mind.

"I didn't myself," he answered, with an air of laughing mystery. "That is, they wouldn't let me off. But where there's a will there's a way, Miss Constance. I wasn't going to miss being at your first party for fifty professors."

This was a flattering announcement ; but though Constance cast down her eyes, she felt that she ought not to be pleased.

"But—but," she stammered, "what did you do?"

"Do? I did without it ; that is, their leave. I took French leave, as the saying is, Miss Constance."

"But won't you be found out?" she asked gravely.

"Ten to one they'll never know it ; and, if they do,

they'll only rusticate me for a month or two, at the worst, and that wouldn't trouble me very much."

"I should think it would trouble you very much, indeed, to be rusticated."

"Not compared with the pleasure I am having to-night in meeting you," he answered, radiantly. "Shall we not finish that waltz?"

Although Constance was conscious that she did not approve of Percy's conduct or the light tone in which he spoke of its possible consequences, she was unable to manifest in the face of his fascinating logic a proper amount of disapprobation. Perhaps, even, she was only too glad to forget, in the delicious rhythm of the waltz, everything except that she was happy and enjoying herself thoroughly. How beautifully he danced. How deftly he avoided collisions and whisked her out of reach of threatening elbows. She did not care to think, she wished only to make the most of the present, which seemed to her very blissful.

After this waltz another young man, whom she had known at dancing-school, came up and spoke to her, and Percy brought up and introduced to her two or three of his friends, one of whom was a collegian, also; so that she was not left alone once until supper was announced, for which Percy claimed her as his partner, and during which he never left her side, except to minister to her wants in the way of oysters and ice cream.

When they returned to the ball-room, they found it equipped with chairs for the german, which Constance had consented to dance with him. While Percy was in the act of fastening two of the chairs together with his

handkerchief, in order to secure them, she suddenly started, and exclaimed, in a contrite tone :

"Oh, how selfish I am!"

He looked up wonderingly at her agitated countenance.

"My sister!" she exclaimed, glancing earnestly round the room. "Where is she? What has become of her?"

"She is not lost, I fancy."

"No. But it is too terrible; I have not thought of her once. You must take me to her."

Just at that instant, while horrible visions of Violet stranded and supperless were haunting her imagination, that young woman entered the room. She was on the arm of Randolph Davis, but another cavalier walked at her other side, and in her train followed two more admirers, who, as soon as she halted, claimed part of her attention. The young girl struck even her sister as having suddenly become a most lovely being. She held herself proudly erect, her white shoulders gleamed like alabaster, her dark eyes sparkled with animation, and the flush of excitement that tinged her cheeks gave to her complexion just the hue it needed to appear exquisitely beautiful. She was evidently entertaining with gay badinage the semi-circle which had formed in front of her, and to which another slave added himself at the moment she caught Constance's eye.

The two girls exchanged beatific nods, each radiant at perceiving the other so well provided for. But in Constance's thoughts, as she gazed, concern for Violet's whereabouts gave place to marvel and admiration, and then, as she noted her sister's magnificent pose and the

fascinating yet almost imperious air with which she already queened it over the cluster of young men who seemed to be hanging upon her every word, a shade of concern of a different kind obtruded itself. Was the princess-like young person who, as it were, had the world at her feet, the tall, gawky and almost plain Violet of a few years ago? If so, what was to come hereafter? What was to be the sequel of so wonderful an evolution—joy or sorrow?





CHAPTER XV.

IN THE SMALL HOURS.

"I think you may free your mind from all solicitude concerning Miss Violet," said Percy, with a laugh, looking out upon the dancers. "She seems eminently well fitted to take care of herself, I should say. She is so signal a success that it seems a pity she is not to come out for another year. I had really no idea she was so handsome."

"She looks lovely to-night ; but she is only seventeen, Mr. White."

"The men who are talking to her look as though they would pardon that," he answered, blithely.

It was time now for the german to begin. When the couples had ranged themselves around the room, Constance was pleased to see that Bill, of whom, also, in her absorption, she had become oblivious, had a partner. But she judged, from the expression of his face, that he was still down-hearted, and when she happened to catch sight of his glove, she apprehended the cause. Poor Bill ! His cup was full. The rent had spread itself until it was a chasm, and he seemed completely engrossed by the problem how best to conceal his hand

from view. Moreover, his doubts concerning his studs and the variegated bouquet, had gradually become certainties in his mind, for no other youth in the room wore studs of a similar pattern in his shirt bosom, and no other bouquet was composed of garden flowers only. He felt that the eyes of the entire company must be fixed derisively upon him,

The german, which began gayly, waxed gayer still. Percy remained unremitting in his devotion, and Constance was taken out two or three times by men who, attracted by her interesting face, had asked to be introduced to her. But she was scarcely a belle in the accepted sense of that word. It was Violet, rather, who was entitled to be called so, upon whom the laurels of the evening, in the form of favors and bouquets, were showered until her plain white dress was fairly gay with ribbons and other decorations, and her lap laden with flowers. Her beauty and fascination prompted man after man to be presented to her, and to return again and again to admire not only her charms of person but her piquancy and sprightliness as well. Ever in her vicinity hovered Randolph Davis, indolent and handsome, and ready to whisper in her ear languid utterances of a kind that flattered, because at the same time he made her believe that all the rest of womankind was beneath his notice. Radiant and triumphant, she stood, as the last figure of the german came to an end at ten minutes to two, the center of an adoring half-dozen, and watched by many other eyes spell-bound by her beauty, none the less striking because one of the bands of her hair had become loosened and had dropped a little. Transported by excitement, so that time was

naught to her, she was unaware at first of the hand laid on her shoulder. It required also her sister's voice, suggesting that it was time to go, before she heeded.

"Oh, Constance, we needn't go just yet. It isn't late."

"It is two o'clock."

"Two! How can it be?"

The genuineness of her surprise took by storm the already captivated group.

"You musn't think of going," said one. "Now is the very cream of the evening," said another; while Randolph Davis cried with an imploring glance: "Just one more waltz, Miss Constance. Let her have one more."

At this moment the musicians began to play again one of the most entrancing of airs.

"I must have one more. Just one, and I will come," said Violet, and with a happy nod at Constance, she laid her hand on Randolph's shoulder, and went spinning down the room.

Constance herself was prevailed on by Percy White to imitate her example. She felt too happy not to accept so plausible an excuse for dallying. But the end of the waltz came at last, and with it she felt obliged to take possession of Violet and snatch her from the custody of her worshipers, a trio of whom followed her to the foot of the flight leading up to the dressing-room, bearing her flowers and favors.

"Good-bye, for a year," she cried, waving her fan over the banisters, with a mock despair that was yet real.

"What cruelty!"

"It must not be!"

"We will reason with your mother!"

So answered as many voices following her up the stairs.

"Oh, Bill, I'm so sorry," gasped Constance, perceiving suddenly, as she reached the top, her brother, whom she had told half an hour before to go up and that she would be ready in a minute. "I really didn't mean to keep you waiting."

"It's ten minutes past two. What will mother say?" replied their natural protector, who was standing on the threshold of the dressing-room, consulting his precious silver time-piece with a severe brow. "You seem to forget that while you can lie in bed, I have to get up to business in the morning, as usual."

"All my fault, Bill. Oh, I've had a lovely time—gorgeous. See all these!" exclaimed Violet, showing her trophies.

"S-h," murmured Constance, realizing that such an ebullition of spirits might be diverting if overheard in the men's dressing-room.

"I have ; I don't care who knows it."

At the foot of the stairs Percy and Randolph were both waiting with their overcoats on. During the short passage from house to house Bill saw fit, eminently to the disgust of his elder sister's admirer, to stick by her side ; but while he was fumbling with the door-key, Percy managed to whisper :

"Will you not spare me a single flower ?"

He had asked that question of her twice before that evening ; once she had pretended not to hear, once she had laughed and shaken her head, now she hesitated for a moment, and her fingers trembled as they played with the leaves of her bouquet.

"Please—just one."

The trembling fingers detached a bud; the timid eyes made sure that no one was looking. Violet was occupied in the rear, and Bill still fumbling with the key.

"Thank you so much! I shall keep it forever. Good-night."

She caught these words, and by the flare of light from the now opened doorway, Constance thought she saw Percy kiss the flower. But she preferred to think that he was simply raising his hat. Not many paces away, another dialogue was taking place. While Constance had almost scurried home, it had pleased Violet to saunter at a gait which suited her escort habitually. She insisted on carrying all her belongings herself, and he was not the sort of youth to insist on being useful. After she had taken a step or two beyond the awning, a big rose which had been given her in the german, and which she had stuck loosely into her dress, chanced to fall to the ground. Randolph picked it up and placed it calmly in his button-hole.

"I am going to keep this," he said.

"You may, if you like. It will be faded to-morrow."

"I ought to say, I suppose, that I would press it and keep it," he murmured, lazily.

"I don't believe you're such a goose," Violet answered, with a laugh and a toss of her head.

"In that case," he replied, with the same languid utterance, "I change my mind. I will press and keep it."

"Then give it to me." She stopped, and faced him beamingly.

"And what if I refuse?"

"Give it to me, Mr. Davis!" The tone was of command, not supplication.

"May I have it, if I ask for it humbly?"

"Can you be humble? Let me see you try."

Randolph, whose ulster, thrown across his shoulders, had rather the effect of a cavalier's cloak, dropped gracefully on one knee on the sidewalk, and held out the rose.

"I crave it on my bended knee," he said, with unembarrassed gallantry.

Violet tittered with amusement.

"How absurd you are! Oh, keep it, if you like," she cried, and therewithal she slipped past him, and ran laughing up the steps behind her sister.

So, the Davis ball was at an end, and all that remained was to talk it over.





CHAPTER XVI.

HOW THE WINTER FARED WITH THE CARLETON PROGENY.

The chief consequence of talking it over was that Violet was allowed to come out, after all. The young girl's importunities, fortified by her enthusiasm and triumphant experience, weakened somewhat Mrs. Carleton's resolution; and when these were reinforced by representations from a dozen different quarters that it would be a shame to keep back a girl so thoroughly suited to grace society, and who had already achieved a brilliant success, her mother exclaimed with a sigh at last :

"Oh, well, have your own way, my dear. Perhaps it is as well that you should be going to parties as dreaming about them."

So there were two Carleton girls in society instead of one, and dressmakers were more rampant than ever in the Carleton establishment, which was inopportune, for Harold was at home again, none the more sober because of his late experience.

That experience had ended far otherwise than seemed probable. The fever, a not severe case in itself, had come in the nick of time for Master Harold, since

it became the means of making Cousin Rebecca his devoted slave. As his mother had implied, when Harold chose, he could be angelic ; and when angelic it was next to impossible to resist him. One of these phases, during which butter would not melt in his mouth, came over him after the fever had left him, and he lay weak but convalescent in the abode of the enemy.

Actuated by a stern sense of duty, Cousin Rebecca had tended him during a fortnight of discomfort, endured his caprices and slaved for him without a murmur, and, as a consequence, was already disposed to regard him with more favorable eyes in spite of herself.

Hitherto her fostering care had been bestowed solely on parrots and poodles ; hence it was surprising to her that a sneaking affection for this ruthless boy of thirteen should begin to take hold of her withered heart-strings. Yet it came to pass that when, beginning to recover but unable to do more than sit up, the angelic fit took possession of him, and he was for days at a time affectionate in tone and saintly in behavior and appearance, the enemy suddenly found herself in his thrall. From this time forth she could not do enough for him, and nothing was too good for him ; and in keeping with the saying, "like mistress, like maid," the entire household, Jane, the cook and the choreman, his admirers in secret, perhaps, before, fell at his feet openly.

Accordingly, Harold returned home with the light of triumph on his brow. Besides a letter which celebrated his praises and cast palpable slurs upon his brothers and sisters, Harold bore as a pledge of his mistress's esteem

a young canary in a cage, that was guaranteed to become a warbler, a new pair of skates and a ten-dollar bill to put in the bank.

"Here is the heir. Come, let us kill him and divide his inheritance among us," said Ben, who was passing Sunday at home.

When the cat was let out of the bag, and the family learned from Harold's own lips the episode of the orange, there was a hilarious outburst, which culminated finally in an agreement that Harold on the whole had earned his good fortune by his ingenuity in coining epithets.

"I thought myself pretty fair in that line," remarked Ben, "but you have a positive genius for it, *fratello mio.*"

Ben was studying Italian; hence this little ebullition in a foreign tongue. He had conceived the idea that it would be a good plan to know that language in order to read about pictures. It was not one of the studies of the Freshman year, but somehow Ben had seen fit to become a free lance in the way of acquiring knowledge. College life had snuffed out all his interest in Greek and Latin and mathematics, and at the same time he thought he had discovered that he was so well prepared in these branches that he would have to do very little work in order to keep up to the mark in them. He was becoming interested in fifty dozen things that were not required. Already he was an aspirant for the baseball nine; bent upon distinguishing himself later in private theatricals; curious as to the mysteries of secret societies, concerning which dark hints were dropped by his classmates from time to time; absorbed by the interest

of coloring a meerschaum pipe ; and addicted to sitting up late at night reading whatever he could lay his hands on in the way of literature—fiction, poetry, biography or the drama.

He and Harrison Fay exchanged frequent letters, and philosophized about life in general. Harrison was deep in science of every kind, and disposed to combat with what he called stern and incontrovertible facts the poetic periods that flowed from Ben's pen. On the other hand, Ben accused Harrison of wishing to demonstrate life to be a mechanism and men and women mere machines. Accordingly they hammered away at each other at the rate of ten or a dozen pages of note-paper weekly, and collected material for their diatribes in the intervals.

Although Ben was but a Freshman and Percy White a magnificent Sophomore, they saw a good deal of each other and were friends. Ben delighted in Percy's easy-going, frank ways, and Percy, in turn, found Ben clever and stimulating. He, too, was a good deal of a night owl, and, under the guise of exercising a protector's eye over the Freshman, would drop into Ben's room many an evening for half an hour's chat before going to bed. Percy said that it did him good to change his atmosphere occasionally, which had become far from studious or literary or philosophical, but was on the contrary lively and volatile, and promised to become reckless. For Percy was traveling with the liveliest set in the class, and was, moreover, one of the liveliest and at the same time most popular men of the set. When he was not hazing Freshmen or playing pranks on the faculty or cutting recitations or "ragging" tradesmen's signs, he was scanning the list of studies to make out which

was the very easiest elective in order to take it, or else was one of a leisurely half-dozen deep in easy-chairs smoking and spinning yarns, when he ought to have been at his books. He was in famous spirits at this period, and life looked very bright, for while he was aware, and sometimes remorsefully aware, that he was wasting his time, he consoled himself by the vague answer that he was going to have all the fun he could for four years, and that then he would settle down as a hard worker. For, after all, there was no need of haste in his case, seeing that his father was a rich and driving man who was amply able to support him for a moderate spell of idleness, and push him rapidly ahead when he was ready to go into business. Not that for a moment Percy contemplated an idle existence. To hear him talk of his future at such moments as he let himself out in his midnight talks with Ben, one would have fancied there was no limit to his ambition. He was a profound believer in his own abilities to accomplish what he set his mind on ; not conceitedly so in an unpleasant sense, but merely it never seemed to occur to him to doubt that the moment he chose to try—really to try—he would overcome obstacles and forge splendidly ahead. Had not his father done so ? Why should not he, who had twenty-fold more advantages than his father had enjoyed in the way of education, accomplish proportionately more ?

So, with these high hopes seething in his brain, he was content for the present to rolic and sing songs, and give free vent to his animal spirits, especially as he was in love with the most charming girl in the world, who would be sure to keep him from doing anything very

bad, and whom he intended to marry as soon as he left college and settled down. He was proud of having chosen her, and proud of her as the sweetest and loveliest and noblest woman whom he had ever seen. He was sure of that, and he felt that for her sake there was nothing he would not endure. What were college rules where she was concerned? If Leander swam the Hellespont, surely he could afford to run the risk of being rusticated, in order to dance the german with her.

But fortune favored Percy in this particular instance. His absence from college was not discovered, and the rosebud which his sweetheart had given him consequently wore no thorns. He was in high feather for days after, and he let it be whispered about how cleverly he had hoodwinked the authorities, and, later on in the week, his exultation inspired him to build a mammoth bonfire under the very eye of the faculty chamber, from the peril of detection connected with which he managed to escape scot-free.

Meanwhile, each of the Carleton girls was enjoying her first winter in society more than she had expected, by which is meant that Constance did not, on the whole, detest going out, and Violet found her anticipations thrown into the shade by reality. It was rather hard for Constance at the first few parties not to have her principal adorer present, and the contrast between the consciousness that some one was there who was desperately devoted to her, and knowing that the men who talked and danced with her thought her simply a very nice girl, was rather trying. Not that she was a wall-flower. She made a good many pleasant friends, who almost invariably spoke to her evening after evening;

and though not a belle like Violet, she had no reason to feel heart-sore on account of neglect. The main difficulty was that after the novelty had worn off, she found that she did not care very much about going, and naturally the fact that she was bored detracted from her power to please ; so that she occasionally returned home declaring that she was never going again. But somehow she kept on going ; could it be that the hope that Percy would appear some evening lured her from festivity to festivity ? A young woman's heart is difficult to fathom ; but does it seem likely, considering she had made up her mind, after mature reflecting, that he had done very wrong in coming to the Davis ball against the orders of the faculty, and that she had done very wrong in giving him that rose-bud ? She had asked herself a hundred times why she had given it to him, and had never been able to obtain a satisfactory explanation. Certainly she would be glad to see him again ; but if he broke the college rules a second time for her sake, she intended to show him what she really thought of such a thing.

She did not have this opportunity, for the next time Percy appeared was by permission duly granted. The winter recess of two weeks had begun, and he was to spend it at home. Not only he, but Ben, who arrived with a tall hat and a cane, and was altogether so "transmogrified," as Violet phrased it, as to be almost unrecognizable. He was still thin and spindly; but he had an air about him that suggested progress, and which prompted Mrs. Carleton to say next day to her eldest son :

"Now do, Bill, follow Ben's example and buy a

beaver. That gray slouch hat you wear is really shabby."

"Yes, do, Bill," echoed Violet, for the gray slouch hat had come to be almost a family grievance. Even Constance added :

"I think a beaver would be very becoming to you, Bill."

William blushed, but looked dogged. To buy a tall hat would be to abandon completely the principles which he had adopted at the beginning of his business career, and which it seemed to him that he had been forsaking one after another. A swallow-tail coat had been bad enough, but a tall hat would be a crowning stroke. Yet in his inner consciousness he yearned to wear one, and though he left the house defiantly that morning in the old gray slouch, he came downstairs dressed for church on Easter Sunday, in a glossy tile and a brand-new pair of yellow kids.

From this time forward, Bill's evolution in the way of toilet was rapid. Having forsaken his principles, there was soon no limit but the size of his bank account to the decoration of his person. He changed his tailor, and instead of jackets that were suitable to a lad of sixteen, appeared in flawless coats, and trousers of which the central crease indicated careful folding. The coral studs had long ago been banished, and the silver turnip, before another year was over, was supplanted by a gold stem-winder, bought from his earnings. His special fads, however, began to be boots and neckties, of both of which his stock was soon more than ample.

His steadiness at the office was in no whit abated by these changes in his outward appearance, and Mr. San-

born, though possibly alarmed at first, was able to detect no falling off in punctuality or methodical devotion on the part of the son of the house. Meantime, the figures in his savings-bank book were constantly increasing in importance, for he had now a salary of eight hundred dollars, from which, by a little parsimony, he was able to save a handsome slice. By the time his taste for boots and scarfs was fully developed, that amount had been swelled to a thousand dollars a year.

Also, in the course of the next twelve-months, Bill's attitude towards society underwent a change. During the first winter subsequent to his fiasco at the Davis ball, he frequented parties under pressure, as the escort of his sisters, and played the part of a shy, stolid youth who found difficulty in making up his mind to talk to anybody ; and when he did, had very little to say. But familiarity will sometimes breed audacity in place of contempt, and instead of despising parties, Bill, by the middle of the second winter, had grown to look upon them with positive favor, and to figure at them as rather a swell. He had become very particular as to the ironing of his shirt bosoms and the immaculate arrangement of his white tie, and when he appeared in full evening dress, he was really a very stylish-looking fellow. His whiskers, which had grown out to the proper length, were groomed by him with tender solicitude, and he might have had a mustache had he not preferred to keep the expression of his firm upper lip unimpaired. He could now talk without embarrassment to such young women as he favored with his society, and moreover, his society was adjudged desirable by the most fastidious petticoats. When Ethel expressed

herself on the subject to Violet by saying: "I never saw such a change in anybody as in your brother William," Violet felt that she need no longer dread lest he would do something peculiar, which was a fear that had haunted her at parties all that first winter.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

Of that first winter, and, indeed, of a second, not much needs to be written in order to chronicle the doings of the Carleton family. At least, whatever is requisite to be known about them will appear sufficiently, in one form or another, if the next two years are passed over without further description, and we think of them and their friends again as that much older; that is to say, of Constance as twenty-one, of Violet as nearly twenty, of Bill as twenty-three, enjoying one thousand dollars per annum, of Ben a junior in college, of Percy White a senior, of Ethel Davis no taller but more patrician than ever, of Harold on the verge of seventeen, of Cousin Rebecca Hubbard not yet defunct, of Harrison Fay almost a civil engineer, of Randolph Davis dropped from college and indolent and handsome as of yore, of Mr. and Mrs. Short still next-door neighbors, and of John Carleton and his wife busier than ever with hopes and fears for their progeny.

Said John to his wife one evening when, as not

infrequently happened, the children were out and they were left at home to sit up for them :

" I suppose you know what you're about, Mary, in allowing Violet and Randolph Davis to carry on as they do? I passed near them this afternoon strolling in one of the by-ways of the Park, but they were so occupied with each other they didn't see me."

" Indeed, John, I am very much disturbed on that score, since you ask me," she answered, laying down her fancy-work—a skate-bag she was embroidering for Harold, whom she was still fain to call her baby. " I didn't suppose you had noticed. It has troubled me very much for some time, because, whatever the outcome, it is likely so far as I can see to be disastrous. If he really wishes to marry her—I cannot bear the idea of it—but if he does, I tremble to think of the future; and, if he is only flirting with her—well, I only hope that Violet, poor child, is not so much infatuated as I fear she may be."

" It has been going on now off and on for nearly two years; time enough, I should think, for any one to make up his mind in. I may be absorbed in my business, but I am not stone-blind. The deacon, your father, would never have allowed a young man to dilly-dally round one of his daughters without asking him to give an account of himself, and I guess it's about time for me to put my oar in and find out how the case stands."

Mrs. Carleton shook her head.

" It wouldn't do at all, John. Young people nowadays have to settle those matters between themselves, so far at least, as making up their minds whether they wish to marry each other or not. If you were to ask Randolph

Davis what his intentions were, he would like as not look as innocent as possible and say that he didn't understand what you meant."

"In which case I should tell him pretty quickly that his room was better than his company, so far as my daughters are concerned."

"And what would be the result? He would inform Violet that he was forbidden to have anything to do with her, and she would consequently be fifty times more anxious to see him. They would correspond and meet secretly, and all chance of influencing her through an appeal to her good sense and right-mindedness would be gone. I agree with you, John, that this must not be allowed to go on; but how to remedy the evil, without driving Violet to commit some folly, is keeping my mind on the stretch day and night. I have hinted to her in pretty plain language once or twice what I thought of him, but whenever I introduce the subject, she changes it at once, so that I am kept in the dark as to what her real feelings are. I can only surmise, but I must say that I have every reason to fear that she is very much interested in him. What is much more doubtful is whether he is in earnest regarding her; and assuming that he is, the problem arises as to what we are to say when she comes to us with the announcement that he has asked her to marry him. Are we to refuse our consent and take the consequences, or let her marry this man and lay up unhappiness for herself? What will the consequences be? We cannot prevent her marrying him if she sees fit, for he has all the money he wants from his father; and, while I do not apprehend that Violet would marry him immediately in the



CONSTANCE PUT HER ARMS AROUND BILL'S NECK.—*See Page 170.*

face of our united opposition, you know what a pertinacious girl she is when she has set her mind on anything. Then, too, she will have the support of the world—the social world that is; for to marry into the Davis family would be considered generally a brilliant match, and so it would be, from the point of view of position and wealth. There is where I feel guilty, John; I ought to have nipped this affair in the bud, and I blame myself for being so egregiously weak as to be flattered that he should be paying attention to her, when I knew at heart that he was not the sort of man I wished my daughter to be intimate with. I tried to distinguish between a desirable partner for the german and a desirable man for a husband, though I might have realized, had I not been vain, how quickly the one may lay pretensions to become the other."

"Which means," said her husband, "that you don't think much of him."

"How can I think much of a young man who has no occupation, who has been dropped from college for idleness, and whose sole ambition seems to be to divide his time between the club and the ball-room? Handsome he is, I admit, and graceful and good-mannered, and more's the pity, for those are factors that argue with a girl to whom they happen to appeal far more powerfully than the most flawless logic. No, John, to tell you the truth, I am sore perplexed."

"She doesn't marry him; that's flat."

"With all my heart. But it will not do to tell her so in that fashion. We must have patience, John; and, above all, retain her confidence, if possible."

"Humph! I have been patient for two years. How about the other one?"

"Constance?"

"Yes. Did you fancy that I had failed to notice that Percy White spends a large portion of time at this house?"

"So do several other young men."

"Gammon! You don't pretend to tell me that he is not devoted to Constance?"

"They are friends, of course." Mrs. Carleton paused and broke into a laugh. "You do notice more, John, than I give you credit for sometimes. I don't really know any more about it, though, than you do. If my daughters don't see fit to confide their love affairs to me, I can't compel them to, though it is sometimes a little hard to have them sit like graven images, and when you ask a harmless question, say, 'I don't know what you mean, mother,' or, 'really, I haven't the least idea, mother.' I used to have an idea that when the time came I should be consulted and kept posted as to what was going on; but, come to think of it, I was just about as secretive at the same age, and if any one mentioned your name, John, I was prepared to shut up like an oyster. I fancy the poor child doesn't know her own mind. What should you say to him for a son-in-law?"

"He isn't good enough for her."

"But is any one?"

John Carleton shoved his hands into his pockets.

"I've never seen the man yet," he said.

"I am very fond of Percy," Mrs. Carleton continued, reflectively. "He is warm-hearted, bright and amiable, and I believe he has excellent abilities to succeed in

whatever he undertakes, if only he will utilize them or undertake something worth while. But at present he is too much of a flibbertigibbit and too volatile. He glories in his narrow escapes from punishment and even in punishment itself; and though Ben is very loyal to him and says little, I can see that he does not approve of the way in which Percy wastes his time. While it will not be necessary, from the bread-and-butter point of view, for him to work, I dare say, as his father is such a rich man, still I should be very sorry to think that he was going to be content simply with amusing himself. Until that is clear, I shall feel in no hurry to encourage his courtship; for I have very little question, John, that he is in love with Constance. As I have intimated, she avoids all reference to the subject, and consequently I cannot say what her real feelings are, but I fancy she likes him better than she is aware. Provided that he sobers down after leaving college, she might easily do worse. I don't know, my dear, which is the most serious responsibility, daughters or sons."

"They are both expensive enough," sighed the father. "What with dressmakers' bills and carriage bills for the girls, and Ben's tuition fees and secret-society assessments, and Harold's schooling, I sometimes get pretty desperate. Still, though I do not lay up anything, I have managed thus far to keep my head above water. God grant, after all our trouble and anxiety, that they turn out men and women who will be a comfort to us."

"I have no fears that they will not turn out well in the end, John. They are young and foolish, but if we can save them from fatal errors during the next few years, I feel sure that we shall be proud of them sooner

or later. What I feel more concerned about, my husband, is that you should have to work so hard and that our expenses are so heavy. That is the only real mar to my happiness. When I see you come home at night looking so tired, I sometimes say to myself that we will pack up and go back to the country; only I really believe you would be sorry to go back to Highlands yourself, John."

"I should, Mary. I have become fond of the bricks and mortar, in spite of myself. You needn't bother about me, dear. Overwork is an American father's prerogative, and I am growing gray in a good cause. There they come," he added, detecting the sound of a latch-key at the front-door, which was followed by the pounding of feet and murmur of voices.

"Come in and tell us all about it!" cried Mrs. Carleton.

"There isn't much to tell, mother. Same old story," said Ben, who was the first to enter, with his opera-hat perched on the back of his head and his scarf still about his neck. He had been going out every night during this second week of his college recess, which was just at an end.

Violet, who followed him, exclaimed mechanically, as though she were reciting a multiplication table, while she stood releasing her black lace *fichu* from her head and neck :

"I danced with Mr. Botsford, Walter Parker, Mr. Smiles, Mr. Davis and Harry Adams. I got six german favors and two bouquets, which I forgot to bring home. Good-night, mother. Good-night, father."

Thereupon, having performed in this perfunctory

manner what was expected of her, she went upstairs with a weary air.

"She looks pale," said her mother, breaking the pause that followed Violet's sombre departure, and she glanced appealingly at her eldest daughter, whose brow, however, though it reflected sympathy, remained sphinx-like.

Constance had perplexities of her own, but they were forgotten for the time in concern for the Ugly Duckling. She had noticed for a fortnight past the growing devotion of Randolph Davis for Miss Lina Harwood, a beauty of a type not unlike Violet's, and an heiress to boot. He had seemed hitherto to share his attentions between the two with mathematical fairness, but this evening, after shaking hands ceremoniously with his old flame, he had retired into a corner with the new one, and never quitted her side. Constance had been glad to see how indifferent Violet had appeared, notwithstanding, and that she had even seemed to be in rampant spirits, and to be enjoying herself more than usual. But when, after they had got into the carriage, she heard her speak, she realized, from her listless tone, that she had been merely playing a part, and her sisterly heart bled in consequence.

Bill followed Constance upstairs, carrying her wraps. He had a habit of dropping into her room before going to bed, after a party, and talking over the affairs of society in particular, and the problems of life—commonly his own life—in general. Constance, as was her wont, threw herself upon her bed with her hands clasped under her head. To tell the truth, so absorbed was she by Violet's unhappiness, to say nothing of her own affairs,

which were perplexing her, she would have preferred to be alone despite her devotion to Bill and her fondness for these midnight confabulations. Although Violet had never said a word to her about Randolph Davis, she had some time ago guessed the truth that her sister was no longer heart-whole ; and while she herself had never much believed in Randolph, she had accepted him as her sister's lover, without a doubt as to his sincerity. But now the dreadful idea was thrust upon her that he had been merely flirting with Violet, an enormity of which the thought made her quiver with indignation from head to foot.

The sight of Bill sitting on the edge of the sofa, recalled her, however, to his requirements. She knew that he was waiting for her to introduce a topic in which he was deeply interested, so she said :

"I thought she looked particularly pretty this evening."

"Who?" asked Bill, who, though he understood her meaning perfectly well, was sometimes capricious, and chose to appear obtuse on these occasions.

"Why, Ethel, of course. I saw you dancing with her two or three times."

"She had two other bouquets," he answered, gloomily. "Harry Salter sent one, I suppose, and I wonder who sent the other. She seemed to be pleased, though, with mine ; she spoke about them. I don't think she ought to have seemed pleased unless she liked me a little."

"No-o, perhaps not," said Constance, doubtfully. "But, you remember, you were provoked the last time you sent her flowers because she didn't refer to them at all."

Bill squirmed in his seat, uneasily.

"I can't make out," he said, "whether she hates me or not."

"She doesn't hate you, Bill; I'm sure of that."

"Of course, she doesn't hate me literally. But it's the same thing if I bore her. Sometimes I think I do, for when I've been talking and she has had to answer, she hasn't always been able to without showing that she hadn't been listening. If she were very much interested in me I think she'd always listen, don't you?"

"Y-e-s—she ought to, of course. But it may have been an accident. She might not have been feeling well. For instance, the other evening my slipper hurt me so, that I scarcely knew what anybody was saying."

Here was a crumb of comfort for Bill, which he rolled over in his mind for a moment. Then he responded in rather a melancholy tone :

"It has happened twice at least. Her slipper couldn't have hurt her every time." But, he added, more cheerily: "One point I have noticed, though; she remembers conversations we've had a long time before. Only to-night she was reminding me of something I'd said six months ago, and which I'd quite forgotten. It shows she does notice sometimes. Don't you think it rather a good sign?"

"Indeed, I do; a very good sign."

"On the other hand," argued Bill, with a second squirm, "whenever I try to say anything that's—er—flattering—er—complimentary at all, she's apt to begin to laugh, so that I find it difficult to go on. It may be," he added, "that she hasn't any idea I'm in love with her." He spoke this last sentence almost with elation.

But Constance shook her hand.

"She may not know you are in love with her; but she must appreciate that you like her, or you wouldn't be apt to be sending her flowers or asking her to go to walk on Sunday afternoons."

"Then you think it a bad sign that she laughs when I try to compliment her?"

"Rather, perhaps," answered poor Constance. "But it all depends on the way she does it. Maybe she is afraid you are going to propose to her."

"I mean to, soon," he answered, sternly. "I shall be admitted to the firm by the first of next January, and I suppose her father would contribute a little something, don't you?"

"I should think so, certainly. Perhaps that would be the best way," Constance added.

"What would?"

"To propose to her."

"In order to find out?"

"Yes."

"Then you think she may care for me?"

"I think she may."

"But you think she may not, also."

"You don't feel sure she does, yourself, Bill."

There was a short silence, during which Bill pulled at his lips and pondered. For six months he had been desperately devoted to Ethel Davis, and had had numerous discussions as to his chances, with Constance, to whom he had confided his passion. She had aided and abetted him in his suit, in every way that lay in her power, by devising excuses for asking Ethel to the house and throwing them together so far as she could,

and by keeping a watch on the young woman in question so as to ascertain what the probabilities in his favor were, and whether or not she cared for any one else. Naturally she gave Bill all the comfort she could, and though he scrutinized ruefully every symptom that was against him, he was thankful for straws, and his hope was of an elastic kind. One day he would be in the doleful dumps, but the next would find him trustful that he was making progress with his Dulcinea.

Now, after studying the carpet for some minutes, with his head between his hands, Bill looked up and said :

"What do you really, honestly think as to my chances, Con? Do you believe she cares for me?"

"It is so difficult to tell, Bill," she said, turning red in her desire to give her brother all the encouragement she could conscientiously, and yet not deceive him. "I cannot tell how she appears when you are alone together. You ought to be the best judge yourself. I've tried hard to find out, and I have watched her when your name was mentioned, and sometimes I've thought she looked conscious, but then again I've thought not. I don't believe she cares for any one else; but I can't say one way or another as to you. I do hope, though, for the best, my dear brother, and I shall welcome Ethel as a sister with all my heart."

"Don't count your chickens," he answered, moodily. "If she won't have me, though, I shall be perfectly miserable. It's foolish to talk about shooting one's self, or anything of that kind; but I sha'n't get over it in a hurry. Good-night, Con; you're tired, and I'm boring you with this plaguey affair. The only way to get it off

my mind is to ask her, as you say," he said, stooping to kiss her.

She put her arms around his neck and answered tenderly :

"As if I could ever be bored by anything that concerns you so deeply. If she doesn't take you, it'll only be because you're too good for her."

A fortnight later, and while Bill was still hovering on the brink of the proposal that would decide his fate, Constance was confronted with the question whether or not she would have Percy White. She had received an inkling from his remarks and manner for some time back that he was determined to tell her of his love, but she had hoped, until it was too late and the words were actually spoken, he would let matters remain as they were.

She had been trying to make up her mind about Percy for a year, without exactly asking herself if she would marry him. There was no certainty, of course, that he intended to make her an offer ; but she had reasoned that it was only fitting that she should come to a definite conclusion regarding his character. The more she reflected in respect to that, the more she shook her head. Percy was always charming when he was talking to her, but away from her Percy had become more and more idle and volatile, and she could not help feeling that he had degenerated into an easy going fellow, who lived simply to amuse himself. When she had questioned Ben, the only comfort she could extract was that Percy was the most popular fellow in college, and the leading spirit in all the societies. But when cross-examined, Ben could not deny that Percy

seemed utterly indifferent to everything else but having a fine time. Actuated by the desire that her friendship should prove itself worthy of the name, she had, now and again, when he assumed a serious tone and disclosed the brilliant possibilities of which he believed himself capable, ventured to remonstrate with him for not making the most of the present. It was all very well to talk about the future and tell what he was going to do; but what reason was there for supposing that he would do any better by and by than now? If he was eager to make a name for himself, why did he not begin to lay the foundation for distinction at once?





CHAPTER XVIII.

TROUBLE FOR THREE.

Whenever Constance had argued with Percy thus, he seemed penitent and spoke of her as his good angel, declaring that for her sake he would begin forthwith to study and interest himself in serious matters; and thereupon his face would glow with enthusiasm, and he would talk in a rhapsodic way, which made her feel very happy, and as though her words had wrought a complete change in him. But somehow, so far as actions were concerned, he seemed to remain pretty much the same old sixpence. He had been obliged to spend most of the summer vacation of his junior year in making up conditions, and he had been on the verge of rustication during the following term because of his participation in a rollicking supper.

And now, when it came to deciding whether she would take him for better or for worse, Constance compressed her lips and said "No," firmly. Of course she manifested a little surprise that he wished to marry her—she would hardly have been a woman had she acknowledged that she had been expecting a proposal for six months—but after the preliminaries were over and Percy was imploring her to take pity on him and

make him the happiest man in the wide, wide world, she shook her head more and more decidedly, though the tears stood in her eyes, until at last, forced by his importunity to put an end to the scene, she declared that it was utterly useless for him to proceed, and asked him haughtily never to mention the matter to her again.

It was a stunning blow to Percy, into whose head, though he had had occasional anxious moments, the idea that Constance would refuse him had never seriously entered. As he betook himself back to college he felt as though he had been pounded between a pestle and mortar. The world seemed utterly vapid, and he described himself to himself in terms which his worst enemy, if there were such a person, would have discarded as too galling. With the capriciousness that belongs to lovers he saw fit to call on Ben the first evening after his return and make a clean breast of the whole affair.

"Your sister has given me the grand bounce, old man. She will have none of me—and—I'm a poor thing."

A gulp of despair accompanied the last phrase, which neutralized completely the effect of fortitude which the opening words were intended to convey.

Ben was all sympathy. Percy had never told him directly that he was in love with Constance, but Ben had tacitly gathered that Percy knew that he knew what was going on. Without thinking very much about the matter, he had taken it for granted that Constance, despite her solicitude regarding Percy's behavior, would sooner or later say "yes." But now that she had said "no," Ben even, while he felt badly on his friend's

account, was not prepared to feel that his sister had acted unwisely, and he could not help saying to himself that Percy was not at present exactly fitted to be the head of a family.

"I shall go to the dogs," said Percy, with a vicious poke at the grate.

"What good would that do?" Ben inquired, pertinently. "It will only hurt your chances."

"Chances? I haven't any chances. She didn't hold out the slightest hope. The more I besought her the more sure she became, and finally she forbade me ever to mention the subject again. Tell me," he added, eagerly, "do you believe there is any hope for me?"

"My opinion isn't of much value, Percy, old boy, because Con has never opened her mouth to me as to what her feelings are; but I've always thought she liked you very well. What reasons did she give?"

"General reasons. She said our tastes were not the same, and—that we looked at life differently. Oh! I'm an ass—a fool. I don't need to be told the reason, for I know it. I've lost her by my own idiocy. Hasn't she over and over again let me see that she didn't approve of the way I was going on, and cautioned me against frittering away my time? I'm not worthy of her. She's right; I'm a miserable, selfish do-nothing. By Jove, Ben, old fellow, I won't give her up without a struggle? I don't think she's fond of any one else in that way; and if I can prove to her that there's real stuff in me, and that I can do something as well as proclaim what I'm going to do, maybe she'll look at me some time. I mean to take my chance, anyhow; for the sooner I pull myself together, the better, whatever happens. She's

the finest woman in the world, and she's better worth striving for and losing than most women are worth winning. I'll take a brace, Ben ; see if I don't."

"Since you've said so yourself, Percy, I don't mind saying that I think Constance may have been influenced a good deal by a feeling that you weren't exactly steady. Because I'm convinced she likes you better than most people, and if you were to take a brace, I believe you'd have a good chance of winning her. We'll take a brace together," Ben added, earnestly, "for I'm in need of one as much as you, if not more."

"You?" ejaculated Percy. "You're as steady as a church ; you're a pillar of strength, Ben."

He remembered now that, when he had entered, Ben was resting his face on his hands on the study-table, but, in his preoccupation, he had paid little heed to the fact.

"A pillar of nothing," answered Ben. "Read that ;" and he tossed him a letter.

It was from his father, and ran as follows :

"MY DEAR SON : By the same mail which brings a request from you for more money comes a letter from the faculty, stating that your semi-annual examinations have been far from satisfactory. In sending you to college, your mother and I both expected that you would do well in your studies, and fit yourself to follow the profession of the law with credit to us and to yourself. Instead of that, so far as I can see, you have let your studies slide, and interested yourself in everything except them. Athletics and secret societies are all very well in moderation, I dare say, but you were not sent to

college to learn to be an athlete or an actor ; and while I have a good business, and am ready to supply you with the necessary funds until you are able to stand alone, I am not a rich man, and cannot afford to give you money to gratify extravagant tastes. I inclose a check for twenty-five dollars, as requested, and am, with much love,

“Your very affectionate father,

“JOHN CARLETON.”

“Whew !” whistled Percy. “What would he say, I wonder, if he knew how I carried on ? You’re a perfect saint, compared with me, Ben. It’s as much as we can do to get you to take a glass of anything, and beyond being a night-owl—for you do sit up late—I don’t see what he has to complain of, except the fact that you had hard luck in your semi-annuals ; but you’ll be sure to pull through all right at the end of the year, and, as to being extravagant, why, you don’t spend a tithe of the money I do.”

“No, but I have been spending more than my allowance right along every month for a year and a half. Father pays for my board and clothes and tuition and gives me fifteen dollars a month for pocket money, and Freshman year I did very well on that, but ever since I’ve been steadily running behind, or rather ahead. I don’t know how it has gone exactly—books, pictures theatres, subscriptions—one thing and another ; and father never said a word until I began to go behind in my studies also. Last June I got one condition, you remember, which vexed him, because he had always regarded me a scholar, and now come these confounded

'semi's.' Father's right ; the trouble is I've gone in for too many things, and made a mess of it. What with acting and playing on the base-ball team and singing in the glee club and painting scenery and sitting up late reading, I've spread myself too thin. I may not have been rapid, as you say, in the ordinary sense, but I've been pretty much the same in another. If I see a book or a necktie or an etching that I want, I'm apt to buy it, though I know I'm in debt, and I'm always flying off in some new direction, instead of sticking to things I've begun, until I've really learned something about them. If only I had devoted all the time I've wasted in this and that passing fancy to my drawing, I might have been able to go to father with decent grace and say that, though I hadn't done much in my studies I had been fitting myself to be an artist ; but now when I tell him that I hate the idea of studying law, he'll think I'm merely shirking. What a fool I've been ! Still I've a year more anyway, as I was thinking when you came in, and I'll turn over a new leaf. You just see if I don't."

While Ben was in one sense a trifle hard on himself in this criticism, it was true that by force of the numerous interests which college life afforded, he had been prevented from concentrating his energies in any special field, and was now justly conscious of a dread of superficiality. But on the other hand, while he could not point to direct results in any one line, he had certainly imbibed a heterogeneous mass of information which had stirred his imagination and quickened his interest in life. Inclined as he was at that moment to regard this self-directed culture as a sheer waste of

time, he realized, when he had a chance to think over his father's letter soberly, that if he took himself in hand at once, there was no reason for him to feel despondent as to the future. But if he was to be an artist, as he was more than ever determined, it behooved him to sacrifice everything else to achieve success in that line. Moreover, he must make up his mind to crucify the flesh and avoid indulgence in the luxurious tastes that had taken possession of him—tastes which were delightful for one who could afford them, but too costly for one who had chosen a calling the pecuniary rewards of which must for a long time remain small.

As he glanced around his elegant room after Percy had gone, he blushed to think how many of the dainty objects which he had purchased in the course of the past three years had been bought without reflection, on the impulse of the moment, merely because he fancied them, not because he needed them, and with money his father had worked so hard to earn. And yet his room had been a source of great pride to him. Men had considered it the most unique room in college. There were others far ahead in point of handsome furniture and merely expensive fittings, but his was pre-eminent from the artistic side. Choice editions of his favorite poets, etchings and water-colors, bits of armor, Japanese curiosities, german favors and collegiate trophies, were blended with what had seemed to him admirable effect. But somehow, now as he gazed, he was not quite sure that the artistic judgment on which he had prided himself had not been here and there egregiously at fault. Would he, if he were purchasing water-colors or etchings or books to-day, buy his over again? Were his

collections of ornaments and pipes and canes the choice possessions he had once fancied? Was not—oh, bitter thought!—this treasure-house of art which he had gloried in erecting merely a palace of tinsel, after all? Here was, perhaps, the most painful moment of his awakening; nor was the subsequent reflection, that this recognition of the truth was merely evidence that his sense of the beautiful was progressing, altogether an antidote to his pain. Even elastic youth cannot endure without mortification to see its idols proved false gods.

Percy, who had stopped at Ben's room without visiting his own, found, on lighting the gas, a letter in his father's handwriting. He had been so wretched after his refusal by Constance that he had taken the train at once without calling at his home. He had felt the desire to avoid everybody, and so he did not let his family know that he was in town. He tore open the letter, expecting it to be of trifling import, though his father was not much in the habit of writing to him; but the contents proved to be appalling. They were as follows :

“MY DEAR PERCY: It is with inexpressible pain that I write to tell you of a great misfortune that has overtaken me. Certain large business ventures, which have proved less profitable than I had confidently hoped, have embarrassed me to such an extent financially that I do not see how I can afford to keep you at college longer. Fortunately, as this is your last year, the deprivation will not be so great to you as if this calamity had befallen me earlier. I shall be obliged to sell my house

in the city and alter materially my style of living for the present.

"While I deplore deeply the loss of the fortune which I had hoped to leave you, and will not attempt to depreciate the value of money, still I will remind you that you are no worse off than I was at your age. Like you, I had my own way to make. I had health but no education that could be called such ; you have both. My advice to you is to take advantage of the offer which I have been able to obtain from one of my friends to put you on a Western railroad, where you will have to begin at the bottom of the scale, but with the chance for promotion if you prove yourself useful. If you were to remain at home, it might be some time before you were able to find anything to do. It will be necessary to come to a decision without delay, for my friend expects an answer. Your mother sends her fondest love, and I am now and ever your devoted father,

"GREGORY WHITE."

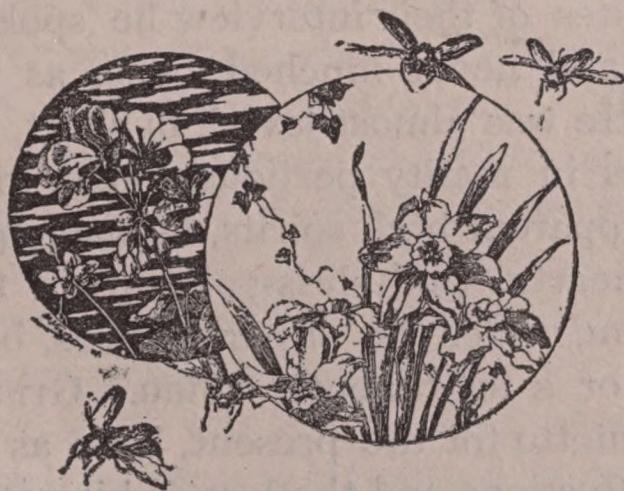
There were two distinct impressions in Percy's mind when he had finished : profound sadness for his father and gladness on his own account. Accept ? Of course he would accept. He wished nothing better than to shake off the dust of college and his boyhood's surroundings and betake himself to a new place where he was not known, and where he could show himself in his true colors.

"Poor old *paterfamilias !*" he sighed, and there was genuine anguish in his distress ; but still he could not muster up much pity for the loss of the money on his own account. While he had never pretended to doubt

his ability to disregard the call of pleasure if he only chose to, there was this to be said: now he *must* work; there was no chance for compromise even; he must work or starve. And how he would work! His father should see that he was a man, and the little girl of his heart should see it also. No more pipe-smoking séances, no more late suppers, no more card parties, no more popularity, no more devil-may-care idleness, but hard, faithful, unwearying work. So keen, indeed, became his enthusiasm at the thought, that he hastened back across the college yard to Ben's room, and running in with his face aglow, cried to his friend, who was lost in his own reverie:

"I'm going West! I'm going West on a railroad!"

Since Ben looked at him in a way that suggested that he thought him crazy, he realized that circumstances warranted his appearing a little more depressed, and he hastened to add the necessary explanation with some degree of soberness.





CHAPTER XIX.

VENUS UNPROPITIOUS.

Four days later he went to say good-bye to Constance, having debated for some time whether he should do so or not ; but he could not bear the idea of transplanting himself for an indefinite period without one more look at the girl of his heart, though she had forbidden him ever again to address her as such. She had heard the news of his father's misfortunes, and it was evident from her look, though she made no reference to the disaster, that she was very sorry for him. But somehow her pity made Percy feel all the less pity for himself, and during the few minutes of their interview he spoke buoyantly of the West and never flinched once, as he reflected afterward. He was almost jovial, in short, and, though his heart was in reality perilously near his mouth in spite of his apparent high spirits, he managed to shake hands in a hearty, God-bless-you sort of fashion, that seemed to him, under the circumstances, better than a whimpering or a sentimental adieu. Grin and bear it must be his motto for the present, both as regards the blow to his affections and the loss of his patrimony.

The condition of a young man who has been repulsed

by the girl of his choice differs materially from that of the young woman who is the victim of unrequited affection. He at least stands none the worse with the world for letting his passion be known, and he may cover the trees of the forest if he will with couplets in praise of her charms or rehearsal of his own unhappiness. But she must rigorously stifle her heart's desire, not admitting even to herself that she is in love, though she may know it well, and much less to society, which frowns upon the woman who sighs. Hence it was that poor Violet found her lot in life at this time bitter and difficult to endure; for not many days subsequent to the departure of Percy White for the West with all his colors flying, the engagement of Randolph Davis to Miss Lina Harwood was announced, and became an absorbing topic of conversation among the friends of the happy pair. It was but natural, perhaps, that almost every one who heard it should, after an expression of opinion as to the brilliancy of the match, hazard the query, though often compassionately whispered as an aside:

“What does Violet Carleton say?”

The answer was simple enough: Violet Carleton could say nothing. What was there to say? What was there to do but to go on living just as before, and make every effort to smile and look cheerful, despite an event which had taken every ray of glory out of the sunshine, and made existence seem a dreary waste that stretched out before her in vapid, hopeless monotony? And the bitterest part of it all was the consciousness that she had allowed herself to become interested in a man who had been capable of making her believe that he was in love with her, when in reality he was merely amusing him-

self at her expense. It was difficult enough at the thought of this to keep the tears down, by biting her lips before the world, but in the privacy of her own room her grief and resentment would have full sway. It meant to her a complete blotting out of life as it had been revealed to her up to this time, and the construction of a new universe gloomy as a pall and peopled by beings whose words and actions were false as Lucifer. Hitherto, to live had been to enjoy ; and existence had been sheer happiness, untrammeled by doubt as to herself or others—a splendid dream, which now, in a moment of rude awakening, had vanished, and left chaos in its place.

She spoke to no one on the subject, and no one ventured to speak to her, though her mother and Constance dared so far as to let their sympathy show itself in little tender offices that still were not obtrusive. In no way did she alter the manner of her daily life, so determined was she not to let that terrible world see that she was desolate. She went to every party to which she was invited ; she reveled and flirted, and seemed the gayest of all who were gay, reserving the privilege to wet her pillow with tears of mortification after the revelry was over ; she congratulated Lina Harwood with the most complacent smile and most cordial pressure of the hand ; she spoke of the engagement to Ethel with the most studied unconcern.

“ You must be delighted with your brother’s engagement, my dear.”

“ Yes ; especially as I supposed that Randolph was not of the marrying kind, and that he enjoyed flitting from

flower to flower. But he has been caught this time ; fairly caught."

It was easy enough to discuss the matter coolly, so as even to deceive her bosom friend ; but how miserable she was ! She could dance and laugh and smile under pressure, but she could not eat and sleep. It was easy to be a hypocrite, but in becoming one the lustre faded from her eyes, and her big features stood out staringly in her mirror. She said to herself that she was growing ugly, and then remembering how she seemed to wax beautiful by force of his praises, she clinched her hands until her nails gnawed her palms, in an agony of self-abasement and despair. If she could but strangle him, as in the olden times women were wont to treat those who played them false ! But no ; she must smile, and give no sign of her misery, or all the world would laugh, and whisper : "She is jealous." Jealous ! How she hated him ! And how much more did she hate herself !

One day, six weeks after the announcement of the match, Violet happened to be standing at one of the drawing-room windows, side by side with her mother, when suddenly the engaged couple passed, and, in passing, bowed beamingly. Mrs. Carleton felt her daughter's shoulders, upon which her own hand was resting, tremble, and with a mother's instinct, drew her toward herself. Violet struggled against the embrace ; then, with a convulsive sob, let fall her head on the loving breast and burst into tears.

"Oh ! Mother ! Mother !" she murmured. "Oh ! Mother ! Mother !"

There was no more said. There was no need of further confession. Her mother knew all, and Violet

knew that she understood; but in that outburst the sufferer found relief from the oppressiveness of her burden and help for further endurance in those protecting arms. Her mother let her cry to her heart's content, simply stroking her head and asking no question. But when at last the torrent of grief became a little gentler Mrs. Carleton said:

"What you need, darling, is to get away from town. I was saying to your father yesterday when he told me the lease of Highlands had expired, that a summer in the dear old place would do us all good. You would be able to rest there with no one to disturb you."

A pressure of the hand informed Mrs. Carleton that the project had struck Violet favorably, and, as the others became enthusiastic when it was communicated to them, six weeks later the family was established for the summer in the old homestead. There was not one of the children who was not glad to return for a brief spell at least, to the peaceful conditions of life in the country. Harold was still of an age when bricks and mortar are an impediment to the spirit, and each of the others felt much the same elation at the prospect of communing with nature, instead of men and women, as the fever-patient at the offer of a draught of cool water.

Not only Violet was a conscious sufferer, for Bill had screwed up his courage just before leaving town to make declaration of his passion to Ethel, and been refused with a sweet, sad surprise that had reduced him to the limpness of a rag and cast him back upon Constance for abundant sympathy. To him the country lanes, or the piazza at Highlands where he could lie in the hammock poring over his late experience, seemed

the only bearable places in the universe. During his two weeks of vacation, which he chose to take at this time, he rose early every morning and tramped aimlessly and savagely through the wood-paths, returning hot and dusty to cast himself with a book, which served merely as a resting-place for his eyes, into the hammock, where he brooded away until supper-time. Constance was apt to bring her chair and sit beside him, willing to talk of the topic which was rankling in his mind, if he were so disposed, or afford him silent sympathy, if that seemed to suit his mood better. Sometimes Ben, who after passing his June examination with decided success, was employing his vacation in sketching, busy as a bee, would establish himself within the range of conversation, and every now and then Violet, who seemed almost afraid to be idle, so constantly was she on her feet, would pass, on her way to or from the garden, the dairy or the hen-house. And ever, day in, day out, Constance sewed and sewed with a half-worried far-away expression, as though she were saying to herself :

“Why did I let him go?”

Yet every now and then she would give a deep sigh and a little decided shake of the head, of which she was quite unaware.

“Why do you shake your head like that, Con?” Bill asked, one day. “I have seen you do it several times, lately.”

“Have you?” she answered, coloring. “I didn’t know I did. I was thinking about something or other, I suppose.”

“Some people talk aloud without knowing it,” he answered, reflectively. “I should think it might be

terribly embarrassing at times ;" after which he lay cogitating upon the matter, thinking how terrible it would be were he to let slip some observation about Ethel unawares. Then his thoughts reverted to Constance, and he saw fit to remark casually :

"Do you know, Con, I had an idea at one time that you and Percy White might hit it off together some day in the way of matrimony. He seemed to be rather attentive to you, and he sent you flowers when you came out. But, of course, when his father failed, there was no chance of his being married, even if he wished to be ; and I don't imagine you would have taken him when it came to the point, though I'll admit that I think he's a better fellow in some ways than I used to consider him."

Constance managed to drop her work-basket on the piazza at this moment. Perhaps her fingers trembled so that she lost control of it in her effort to keep control of herself. She was too busy picking up the straying spools and skeins to answer ; but Violet, who happened to be passing and had heard Bill's speech, stopped, and regarding him for a moment with scrutiny to satisfy herself that he was speaking seriously, said, in a tone the irony of which was thinly veiled :

"Your imagination is so active, Bill, that it carries you away at times."

Thereupon she grasped the hammock, and with a sweep of her arms set it violently in motion.

"I say, there !" cried Bill, the equilibrium of whose recumbent attitude was seriously disarranged by the suddenness of the movement. "Hold on, Violet. What are you trying to do ?"

"A swing will do you good," she answered; and, deaf to his exclamations, plied her strokes with vigor.

He tried hurriedly to raise himself, but Violet, having demonstrated by a couple of terrific jounces that if he dared to resist there was an imminent probability of his being upset, he had to resign himself to her tender mercies and be swung to the full extent of her capacity. She looked, as she stood there with a determined compression of her lips, and her sleeves rolled up above her elbows, like a young Amazon ablaze with the virtue of her cause; and it is highly probable that she might have crowned her vengeance by letting Master William shoot out on to the grass had not Constance's imploring eyes counseled mercy. As it was, she swung him until her breath began to fail her; then, with a satisfied "There, take that!" she "let the cat die" and escaped into the house.

Bill, who had taken the matter amiably, sat up laughing as soon as he could stop himself, and after a chuckle or two at his own discomfiture, said oracularly:

"It's a comfort to see Violet in better spirits. I've sometimes regretted, Con, that I didn't horsewhip Ranny Davis. I thought of it at the time, but I didn't feel sure that Violet would like it."

"I am sure she wouldn't have liked it at all," Constance answered, eagerly. "I think, Ben," she added, "that in matters of that kind brothers cannot often be of much use."

It is doubtful, however, if the full meaning of this gentle reproach was taken in by the listener. He had become engrossed again by the burden of his own disappointment, for he murmured in response:

"This family does not seem to have much luck in getting married."

It happened on this very morning that Constance received a visit from Miss Molly Hall, whom she had known as a little girl at Hampton, and who had grown up to be a fine-looking, buxom young woman.

As she lived almost next door, she was readily prevailed upon to drop in with her fancy-work on nearly every subsequent morning, on each of which occasions Bill was present also. For the first day or two he lay in the hammock without paying apparent heed to the rustic maiden, whose fresh, hearty exuberance attracted Constance, and disposed her not to be too critical; but about the third day Bill began to take notice and to pay little civilities to the comely neighbor; on the fifth and the sixth day, he proved gallant enough to escort her home, and thereafter their saunterings together were frequent. To tell the truth, Bill was the most surprised of persons at his own infatuation, and not a little disgusted at what seemed to him must be, if not fickleness on his part, a lack of deep sensibility. To have been refused by a princess of a woman six weeks before, and as a consequence thereof to have gone about ever since a genuinely blighted being, and yet to be now contriving opportunities to meet a fresh-faced country maid, struck him as eminently strange, to say the least. And the strangest part, perhaps, was that, though he was fascinated in spite of himself by this winsome lass, he was just as much in love with Ethel as ever. At least he told Constance that this was the case when at last he found himself in need of explaining his quandary to some one. Constance had observed his gradually grow-

ing devotion to Miss Molly with emotions that vibrated between consternation and mirth. There could be no question as to what her brother's feeling had been for Ethel, and yet here he was, apparently, at the feet of a second charmer before his passion had had time to cool. It seemed both monstrous to her and inexpressibly funny.

Before unburdening himself, however, Bill had finally arrived at a solution of the case which was the only one consistent with the circumstances; and this was that one could be in love with two persons at the same time without absolute loss of respect; that is to say, it was not incompatible for a blighted being to be faithful to number one, and yet to be drawn toward number two, without making himself justly liable to the charge of fickleness, because here he was himself just as much in love with Ethel as ever.

"I would marry her to-morrow, if she would have me," he asseverated to Constance.

"But seeing that she won't, you are thinking of marrying Molly, eh?"

William looked confused.

"That doesn't follow, necessarily," he said. "A man may like a girl without wishing, necessarily, to marry her."

"I'm glad to hear it," Constance replied, dryly.

Much as she had been attracted by Molly's freshness, Constance regarded her as very second-rate to Ethel in breeding and education, and, what was much more vital, not nearly so well adapted to Bill in point of community of tastes and interests.

But her tone did not please her brother, who said :

"I don't see anything the matter with Molly, though."

"She's a sweet girl, and pretty as can be; but she wouldn't suit you at all, Bill, and you know it perfectly well yourself."

Bill did know it, and was trying all he could either to persuade himself that this was a mistake, or else to become disenchanted because of the truth of it. But the struggle had seemed every day more fruitless, and the worst of it all was that, whatever any one might say, he was sure that he was still in love with Ethel.

Constance continued presently, deeming, doubtless, that she was justified under the circumstances in letting the truth be known, even though it should cause her favorite brother pain:

"Of course, Bill, if you are really in love with Molly, I haven't a word to say, and I shall welcome her as a sister with all my heart, as I should any girl you chose to marry. But I have an idea she may be bespoke. I have heard that she and young Emil Logan, who is away in a cotton-mill, are the same as engaged."

"What! That young snip? Why, he's only Harold's age."

"He's a little older than Harold, and you forget that Harold is eighteen."

Here was a damper, certainly, and disagreeable food for reflection. The idea that a mere youth should be preferred to him, an experienced business man on the road to fortune, was not to be accepted too readily. However, Bill realized that caution was incumbent under the circumstances. He could not afford to be rebuffed twice in one season. It had been by no means clear to him that Miss Molly was more than flattered by

his attentions. The very dissimilarity of their tastes made conversation between them difficult, and he was sometimes conscious that he was possibly boring her. And yet, in spite of Constance's double warning, he continued flitting round the traditional candle, on the verge of a proposal, until the end of the summer.

No words on the subject passed between Bill and Constance, until after the family had returned to town, when one day he said :

" You were right, Con, about Molly Hall."

" How so ?"

" She's engaged to Emil Logan. You remember how devoted I was to her ?"

" I can scarcely have forgotten it, Bill."

" A man told me to-day," he continued, reflectively, " and I was surprised to see how little I cared ; in fact I was glad to hear the news. It's astonishing how she has slipped out of my thoughts since we left Highlands. My interest had begun to wane a little before we moved, but I told her I should come out often to see her ; yet I am almost ashamed to say, I haven't gone once. I can see perfectly now that she wouldn't have been the girl for me at all ; I should have been miserable with her. And the funny part is I knew it at the time, even when I was most smitten with her." He stopped and laughed, then, after a moment : " You will promise never to repeat what I tell you ?"

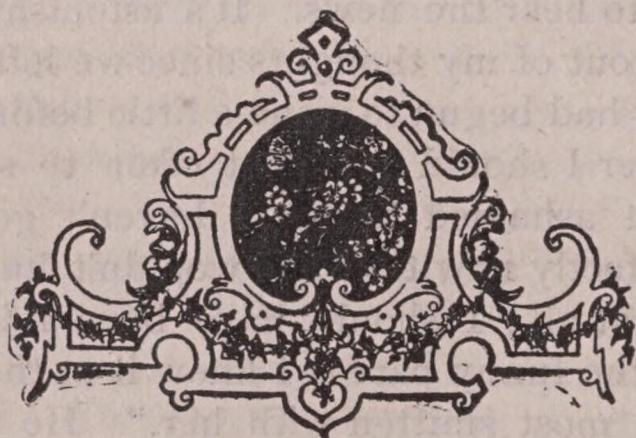
" Certainly."

" Well, I never actually proposed to Molly, but—er—but if she had been willing to have me I guess there was a time when she could have. All's well that ends well, but it's rather humiliating to think that one is

liable to commit what he knows to be a folly with his eyes wide open, and when into the bargain he really prefers another girl."

"It's rather difficult for me to understand, Bill, I must confess," Constance felt constrained to reply. "I suppose," she said, presently, "that Molly must have had in mind whatever you did say to her, when she asked me one morning if I didn't think it was sometimes difficult to tell if a man was proposing or not. It struck me as a strange remark at the time."

"Yes, I guess she must have had me in mind," he answered, ruefully.





CHAPTER XX.

B O I L E D D O W N.

One day, that same autumn, immediately after Ben's return to college, a crowd of interested and curious students was gathered in his room. They had assembled in response to an advertisement displayed at several conspicuous points in the college grounds that on this particular date there would be an auction of valuable personal effects, books, pictures, statuary, and so forth.

The news that Ben Carleton's artistic apartment was to be dismantled, and that his precious belongings were for sale had been speedily bruited about, and had drawn together a considerable number of would-be purchasers ; both Freshmen, who had been notified, not only by the terms of the advertisement but by the others, that this was one of the greatest opportunities of their lives, and upper classmen desirous to become the owners of certain treasures. Moreover, though all agreed that, if one were determined to sell, an auction at the beginning of the year, when men were fitting up their rooms, was a vastly shrewder proceeding than at commencement time, when every one was in a hurry to get away, still the why and wherefore of the sale had remained a

mystery. Ben was not going to leave college, and no one could learn that his father had lost money. Why then should he dispose of his furniture? No one had been able to answer this conundrum satisfactorily, though to those who knew him best, Ben, when questioned, had stated without further explanation that he had use for the money.

Ben was his own auctioneer, and he had announced beforehand that the sale was to be conducted on the strict system of cash or no delivery. He was in his shirt-sleeves, standing on a table in one corner of the room, and inspired alike by sentiment and the desire to set forth the merits of his wares, he was fain to make use of the periphrases peculiar to the calling he had for the moment adopted.

“Gentlemen, I come now to articles numbered on the catalogue twenty-six and twenty-seven, and entitled ‘Two Sporting Pieces.’ Permit me to pause a moment before I proceed to the ruthless sacrifice of these artistic master-works. Examine them if you please. They are twins ; Costor and Pollux—Romulus and Remus. They are modestly entitled ‘Two Sporting Pieces ;’ but it does not need my reminder to make known to you that they are emblems not only of artistic excellence, but exemplars of the fascinating sport of hunting dear to the heart of old England, a land to which, however hostile we may feel in occasional moments of righteous indignation, our thoughts ever revert with pride as the home of our ancestors.”

“Boil it down, Ben,” interrupted a voice, but without pause the speaker continued :

“You will observe that the gentleman in the pink

coat, who figures as the hero of each of these gems, has a dash and a poise, which either you or I would regard as appropriate to a great-great grandfather, which indeed, gentlemen, he well may be. Think of that. You had not thought of it before ; you, sir, who have just suggested that I 'boil it down—' that this may be a family portrait. (Laughter and applause.) Observe too, that though in each case he bears the marks of mis-adventure, which indicate, perhaps, that he and his horse have at one time parted company, nothing has been able to dampen the ardor of either rider or gallant steed, as witness on the margin the language which the clever artist has put into the mouth of his hero in number twenty-seven : 'By the Lord Harry, my chestnut horse can almost fly !' Ah ! gentlemen, there is courage and pathos and enthusiasm and the witchery of horsemanship blended into one by the limner's exquisite art. How much am I offered for these masterpieces ?'

There was a pause, and the murmur of laughing voices.

"How much for the pair ?"

"Fifty cents."

"You insult me and the noble rider and the clever artist by such an offer. Twenty-five cents apiece for these gems ! Why, the color of his pink coat is worth treble the sum."

"Sixty."

"Five."

"Sixty-five cents for the pair. Make it a dollar, you, sir, who, in what I took to be your desire to proceed to business, asked me to 'boil it down.' Will you see your ancestor slaughtered in duplicate for sixty-five cents ?"

"That's right, Ben. Sock it to him."

"A dollar," cried a voice from another quarter.

"I thank you, sir. You have a fine, artistic sense; but the price is dirt cheap. I am offered a dollar for—"

"Dollar and ten."

"Fifteen."

"Twenty."

"That is more like. I am offered one dollar and twenty cents; who'll make it five? Thank you, sir. Five—five—one dollar and twenty-five; going at one dollar and twenty-five. Who'll make it thirty? Going at one dollar and thirty cents—and—sold for one dollar and thirty cents to Mr.-er-er— Will the gentleman give his name?"

"Todd," said a faint voice.

"Mr. Todd, and it's the best bargain a Freshman ever got. And now, gentlemen, we will proceed without delay to ascertain who is to be the future owner of these bits of armor which have for two years adorned the walls of this apartment—armor which had the luckless Hector been fortunate enough to possess, he might have defied the gods themselves, to say nothing of the great Achilles."

Such was the tenor of the proceedings, which lasted two full hours without diminution of interest on the part of the audience, whose bidding increased rather than diminished in activity and zest. Nothing was reserved but the bare necessaries—a bed, a bureau, a wash-stand, two chairs, a study table, a lamp and a few books. Everything else, pictures, *bric-à-brac*, canes, gew-gews, were knocked off one after another at prices which, thanks to the auctioneer's eloquence or to the

high estimate accorded to his artistic taste, were occasionally in excess of their real value, so that the table was fairly covered with bank-bills and silver coin by the time the last article was reached. For another hour there was a hubbub, resulting from the removal by the various purchasers of their new possessions, before the termination of which it was nearly dark. Ben, who had watched from the window-seat the stripping process, found himself confronting a scene of desolation when he lit the gas after the last customer had departed. But though he felt a little tremulous about the gills, he whistled as he gathered up the proceeds of the auction, which amounted to no less than one hundred and nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents.

"A tidy sum," he murmured, with satisfaction. "I've saved this from the wreck, anyway."

Thereupon he drew one of his two chairs to the study-table and indited the following :

"DEAR FATHER : The letter you wrote me last spring made me feel very badly. I did not answer it at the time, because there was nothing to say, except to promise to do better, and I had promised that before. Since then I can point to rather a better showing, for in my examinations in June I got quite a high percentage, and I have endeavored to concentrate my attention on a few things instead of spreading myself too thin. I have deeply bewailed the extravagance in money matters to which you refer and to which I must plead guilty. I send you one hundred and nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents, which I have realized from the sale of a lot of things which I really did not need, which I

bought with your money. They cost more than I have been able to sell them for, but this money will help to pay for me during the rest of the year. As to my future I wish to have a long talk with you the next time I come home, for I have made up my mind that I shall succeed best in a different profession than the law. I am very much in earnest about it, and when you hear what I have to say, I think you will agree with me. Thanking you, dear father, for all your loving kindness to me, I am

“Your loving son,

“BENJAMIN FITCH CARLETON.”

After he had written this letter, Ben locked it and the money up in the table-drawer and went away to supper. He intended to get a bank draft with the money the first thing in the morning and enclose it in the letter. He felt proud and happy. The fellows might call him eccentric if they chose—he did not care. His room had been furnished with squandered money, and the sight of it would have made him far more uncomfortable for the next six months than the bare walls. Even now he had a carpet and bed and study-table, and, moreover, the old red rep curtains which he had replaced at the beginning of his junior year with others of more elegant and more modern pattern, and which he had bid in for the sake of “Auld Lang Syne” when they were on the point of going for a dollar bill for the pair. Once he had gone into ecstasy over these curtains. To-morrow he would tack them up, and they would make his dismantled room as comfortable as needs be. Henceforth he would be a real student, not a make-believe one.



CHAPTER XXI.

MR. CARLETON PAYS THE DEBT TO NATURE.

Ben was gay at supper and after it gay at the ease with which he resisted temptation to dally here or there, and went back to his room for a couple of hours of study. An envelope protruded from under the door, which he drew out before entering and held up to the gas-jet in the corridor. It was a telegram. It must be from home. Somebody was sick probably and he had been sent for. He read feverishly and found his worst fears realized. It was from his mother.

“Your father is seriously ill. Come at once.”

His father seriously ill! His heart was beating thumpingly, and he experienced a sinking feeling that prompted him to lean against the wall. Then he read the telegram again, and entering his room, lighted the gas with trembling fingers. There was not a moment to lose. He could, if he hurried, catch a train that would get him home by midnight. Snatching up his hand-bag, he stuffed into it a few necessary articles, and was gone; but a moment later, he reentered panting, to

unlock the table-drawer and take possession of the letter and money. A dreadful thought which already several times had seized him, brought his heart into his mouth : he might be too late, and his father would never know. But another thought counseled courage ; and with compressed lips he swept his sleeve across his eyes, and dashed down-stairs.

It seemed to him as though those cruel hours in the train would never come to an end. A dozen times he re-read the telegram, only to be brought face to face with uncertainty. When he had left home a week before, his father had been complaining of a slight cold, but nothing had been thought of it at the time. When at last the train trundled into the station, Ben threw himself into a cab, and told the driver to drive as fast as he could. As they approached the house, he peered anxiously from the window, and perceived a carriage which had drawn up just ahead. From it alighted Mr. and Mrs. Short, who had just returned home after a year's absence, during which they had made the circuit of the world. They turned at the noise of the second carriage, and were grasped by Ben impulsively by the hand.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you back, so glad ; but I can't stop. I have been sent for ; my father is very ill."

He did not wait to hear their exclamations of concern and sympathy, but sprang up the steps. As he grasped the bell-handle a sickening horror seized him ; there was crape on it ; his father must be dead.

Unperceived by him, a face had peered behind the curtain as he drove up, and now, before he could regain the strength to ring, the door was opened by Violet.

"Is it true? Am I too late?" he cried imploringly.

Her silence confirmed what he already knew. She led the way into the hall.

"Yes, Ben, father is dead. He died this afternoon of pneumonia. It was very sudden at the last. He had been ill for several days, but until this morning, the doctor said he was doing well."

A terrible silence followed. Ben sat upon the edge of a chair with his head between his hands, and stared at the carpet.

"Where is mother—and the others?" he asked, presently.

"Mother is upstairs with Constance and Harold, and Bill has gone to make the necessary arrangements. I waited here to meet you."

"Thank you, darling. Oh, Violet, it is terrible!"

"Terrible! I cannot take it in; I cannot believe that we are never to see father again!"





CHAPTER XXII.

BUSINESS AND SENTIMENT.

The days that followed were painfully sad ones. Death was a new experience to the Carleton children, who loved their father dearly, and had never realized how much they loved him until now that he was taken away. To the distress of the funeral succeeded a period of silent suffering, during which life appeared to have lost all its savor, and it seemed to each one of them as if they could never smile again. The sight of their mother in her widow's cap, looking ten years older, but bravely striving to be cheerful, wrung their hearts and filled them with the eager desire to be a comfort to her. Even in the bitterness of their filial sorrow, they appreciated already that their lives were only just beginning, but that she had lived and could never be entirely happy again.

There were many things to be attended to in the way of business which devolved principally upon Bill. John Carleton's capital was in his lumber business. From this he had derived a handsome income since his return from the war, little of which, however, he had been able to put aside, so that the family at once was brought face

to face with the necessity of retrenchment. They could not go on living so lavishly as when their father was alive, even though the money was allowed to remain in the firm under the management of Mr. Hazard and Bill, as seemed, on the whole, the wisest plan, after due consideration. Invested in bonds or mortgages, the property would yield too small a return for the support of them all, and Mrs. Carleton, to whom everything had been left outright by her husband's will, with the request that she would bequeath it to the children in equal portions at her own death, finally concluded to let it remain in the business. Such was the desire of all the children, save that Bill insisted faithfully on pointing out to them the risks of such an arrangement. The business was an old and established one, but still business was business, and no degree of prudence could guard against bad debts.

"Besides," he added, "the percentage of business men who fail is something appalling—away up in the nineties, I believe."

"I don't care, Bill. I am ready to put trust in you, my son; and if the business continues to be successful, you will be able to lay up enough in a few years to make you all tolerably comfortable after I'm gone; and if it should come to grief, why there are three of you boys to look after Constance and Violet."

"We do not intend to need anybody to look after us, mother," said Constance. "I hope to try to support myself, and I'm sure Violet can."

Violet said nothing, but her looks were eloquent.

"I'm in favor of letting the money stay where it is," she answered decidedly.

Their first idea had been to return to Highlands, but on second thought, it was decided to sublet their present house, the lease of which had another year or two to run, and hire a more modest establishment in town. Bill said that he disliked the idea of two trips daily in the train ; but, perhaps, the truth was he had become thoroughly attached to city ways. The girls were rather doubtful on the subject, being drawn toward the country by the greater opportunities there afforded for freedom and retirement, but realizing at the same time that they would be cut off from much that interested them were they to abandon town. The desire to let Harold remain at the same school through another year was the turning-point in Mrs. Carleton's mind, divided between her fondness for Highlands and the painful memories of a happy wedded life that would constantly be awakened were she to return to the dear old homestead.

At the first opportunity Ben had shown his mother the letter which had never been delivered to his father, and asked her blessing on his project, which she gave heartily. He insisted that the proceeds of the auction should be turned in to his father's estate, but she would not listen to such a thing, declaring that he should use the money to supply him with necessary artist's materials, and that he fairly had a right to it. He left her presence not entirely convinced, and determined to consult Bill as to the matter.

It had not occurred to him that his elder brother would have any objection to his following whatever calling he chose ; and though he expected the announcement of his intention to become an artist would be more

or less of a surprise, he had not looked for opposition from this quarter.

"An artist!" exclaimed Bill. "An artist!" he repeated, with what was decidedly a sneering inflection and raising his eyebrows.

"Yes; I've more talent for that than anything else, I think."

"Father intended you to be a lawyer."

"I know he did, Bill. I meant to have told him about it, but—but I didn't." He did not choose to mention the letter.

"He would never have agreed to it—never in the world. His heart was set on your becoming a lawyer."

"I know it was," said Ben, sadly. "But I think I should have convinced him in the end."

Bill shook his head with energy.

"Never in the world. Father abhorred anything of the sort."

"How do you mean 'anything of the sort?'" Ben asked, quietly, looking up at his brother.

It was just after dinner, and they had the room to themselves.

Ben pursed his lips and pushed back his chair a little.

"He never had any patience with unpractical people—musicians, literary folk, artists, what not. You know what I mean perfectly well. Of course, he believed in art and literature, just as I do; but when it came to making a living out of one of them, why, he'd have said it was ridiculous to attempt it—for you, I mean."

"Mr. Short says I have talent," said Ben, humbly, thinking for a moment that the criticism was directed at his ability.

"I don't say you haven't; in fact, I know you're a dab at it. But the point is that it's a poor profession to follow."

"Why?"

"There's no money in it, to begin with."

"What else?"

"That ought to be reason enough, I should suppose. Well, since you ask, I think artists are a poor lot. They're apt to be long-haired, seedy-looking chaps, in velveteen jackets, who don't pay their bills and sponge on their mother and sisters."

"That shows how little you know about them."

"Then why did you ask my opinion?"

"I didn't; you gave it."

There was an angry pause, during which Bill drummed on the table.

"Oh, well, go your own way!" he exclaimed impetuously.

"You have admitted," began Ben, trying to speak in a deliberate tone, "that music and literature and art are delightful things."

"In their proper places, yes."

"Well, if they are to flourish, some men must devote themselves to them. Why shouldn't I be one of those men? I'm not afraid of being poor."

Bill pulled at his lip.

"It is easy enough," he said, "to argue in that way, but ten years hence you'd talk very differently. I wouldn't say a word if we had plenty of money, or even if you had enough to scratch along with; but with mother and the girls dependent on what we are going

to make, I think it would be worse than folly for you to become an artist."

"Mother knows and approves."

"Women are not practical. They dream at once that any one in whom they are interested will do wonders, and they never count the cost or consider the consequences of failure. As a lawyer you would be sure sooner or later to pick up business. I could throw some into your hands immediately, and more would follow. As an artist, you will have to paint extraordinary pictures, or they won't sell ; and if they don't sell, you'll be high and dry at thirty, without a dollar to your name."

"There are other things beside money in the world, Bill."

"But a man is bound to support himself and not become a burden to others."

"I shall support myself, never fear. If I don't, I shall never become a burden on you."

"It wasn't of myself I was thinking," Bill answered, coloring. "If I had money at any time and you wanted it, you'd be welcome to it, you know perfectly well. I'm merely advising you for what I consider your own good. If you choose to be an artist, of course I can't prevent you."

"I have chosen," Ben replied, incisively. "I'm willing to take your word for it, that you've been advising me for what you are pleased to call my good, and that's why you have said so many disagreeable things. Otherwise, I might be disposed to suggest that business is apt to blind a man's eyes to everything in life that cannot be reduced to dollars and cents."

Bill looked astounded for a moment, then he said, with warmth :

"I've noticed, though, that you're not above spending dollars and cents, all the same. Wait until you've tried making them for yourself, and maybe—maybe you won't be so extravagant as you are now."

Ben winced at the allusion, and tears, partly of anger, partly of mortification, sparkled in his eyes as he said :

"That was what I really wished to speak about when I told you that I was going to be an artist. I didn't wish your advice as to whether I was to be one or not ; I had decided that question definitely already. But, in view of your last speech, I can guess what your views would be as to the other. I have been extravagant. No one knows it better than I do ; and, though you may not believe it, I've been very much troubled by the thought that I've spent so much of father's money during the past four years, and—and I've been doing what I could to atone for it." He paused, and drawing out his pocketbook threw the bank draft on the table, and said : "There is something that will make up partly what I wasted, and you need have no fear that I shall ever sponge, as you call it, again on my mother and sisters."

Bill picked up the draft, and examined it curiously.

"What is this ?" he asked, with a half-amused air.

"It belongs to father's estate."

"One hundred and nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents, and payable to father's order. Where did this come from, Ben ?"

"No matter. It belongs to father, and you are the person to take charge of it. I—I should like a receipt, so

that my extravagance need not be flaunted in my face hereafter."

Bill laughed, and then colored.

"A receipt? Certainly. That is," he added, "if I choose to receive it."

Ben, who had realized that he would give much not to have uttered these bitter words, suddenly covered his face with his hands, and burst into tears. For a moment or two he sobbed like a child, then he looked at Bill, and said :

"I had no right to say what I did about the receipt. I beg your pardon. I was so angry, I didn't know what I was saying."

"I guess we've both been pretty angry. That's all right. See here, Ben, what's the matter? What does this money mean?" asked Bill, leaning forward.

Ben hesitated a moment, as he wiped his eyes.

"It is the proceeds of the sale of all my college things. I sold them by auction the day father died."

"The dickens you did. The money belongs to you, then." He reflected for a moment. "Of course it belongs to you. I see your point, and it's very honorable of you; but the rest of us wouldn't think of taking your money. See here, Ben. I didn't appreciate, when you began, that you had really desired to be an artist, or I wouldn't have said so much. If we five don't stand by one another, no one will stand by us. We both of us got angry and said what we didn't mean."

"That is very square of you to talk so," said Ben. "I certainly lost my temper, and I'm sorry for it; and since you think I ought to keep the money, I'm willing to do so. I don't wish," he added, "to revive discussion

but I can't help saying that it's very disappointing to me that you can't approve of my choice of a profession ; but, as you've stated, that needn't really interfere with our being fond of each other and standing by each other. As dear father used to say, it takes all sorts of people to make up a world, and we can't expect to agree in everything. I've thought the whole matter over until it's threadbare, and I feel sure that what I'm doing is best for me."

"It's true, as you say ; we can't expect to agree in everything," replied Bill. "Each of us must paddle his own canoe ; and if either of us gets upset, it won't be the other's fault."





CHAPTER XXIII.

WITHOUT FEAR AND WITHOUT REPROACH.

The upshot of this armistice between the brothers was that Ben threw himself into his art with all his heart and soul. He was eager to leave college at once, and though both his mother and Mr. Short, whose counsel he sought, advised him to remain through the year so as to take his bachelor's degree, he declared that he could not afford the time. He began to attend at once the local Academy of Design, and to study and practice day and evening. Mr. Short repeated the offer to invite a skilled artist to his house to give them both lessons two afternoons in the week, which Ben, after some hesitation, accepted, expressing his regret at the same time, that he had allowed the previous offer to remain unacted upon out of sheer heedlessness.

"We live and learn," answered his mentor. "If every youth was wise in his generation, the world would become unbearably dull."

"But I should rather have some other fellow be the fool. If I had learned without living, I should probably have learned by this time to be able to make some money."

"Now, young man, that isn't the way to talk at all.

When you adopted art as a profession, you turned your back on the gold that perisheth."

"Yes, but I must live, Mr. Short."

"Well, you are living, aren't you?"

"Yes, in my mother's house. It's hard enough to feel that I have to be a drain on her small resources for my bed and board instead of helping to make her more comfortable; but I can see that it would be foolish and unreasonable of me, beside a grief to her, if I were to put my foot down and refuse to accept these. But that's as much as I can accept. I will never take a cent of money from her or from anybody else, which is not earned, and if you attempt in any way to make me an object of charity, I'll hie me to some out-of-the-way attic where I shall be able to starve in peace."

"Wherefore this belligerence?" laughed Mr. Short.
"What have I been doing?"

"Oh, you have been dropping hints every now and then the past few days that I needn't concern myself about how I was to live, but ought to devote all my energies to learning how to paint; as much as to say that you would look out for the rest. And it's because I know how kind you are, and that you would like nothing better than to have me lie down on you, that I wish you to understand once and for all that I can't possibly allow myself to do so. I have consented to let you pay for my private lessons on the gauzy plea that you were going to take lessons yourself, in any event; but I draw the line at them."

"I admire your independence, Ben, but I can't quite agree with you all the same. You take too stern a view of the situation. Why shouldn't you be willing to let

your mother and your friends tide you over until such time as you are able to support yourself? I have no children of my own, and I should be only too glad to be your banker. When you are famous you can repay me if the obligation weighs too much on your mind."

Ben shook his head decidedly.

"Many thanks to you, but I mean to grow famous—if I grow famous at all—without being boosted by any one. I've undertaken to show that I can support myself as an artist, and I don't mean to begin by receiving alms. It may be foolish, but I feel that enough money has been wasted on me already, and that if there is anything in me as an artist, it will come out all the more quickly because I have only my profession to rely on. If there's nothing to come out, I dare say I shall be able to get a place as horse-car conductor or something in that line."

"I don't believe you'll ever be quite reduced to that," said Mr. Short, "though for the first year or two I'm afraid you can hardly expect to compete with the conductor in point of income. All then is, Mr. Artist, if the time comes that you repent of your independence, remember that you have only to say the word and my check-book is open to you."

"After what I have said, though," said Ben, "I would rather starve than utter it. But, in spite of your gloomy predictions, I've no idea of starving."



CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. SHORT TO THE RESCUE.

Women are slower than men to adapt themselves to the new circumstances that result from a severe bereavement. While Bill and Ben were finding in their new responsibilities and cares a fresh zest in life, their sisters were still trying to recover from the shock of their father's death, which had altered so sadly for them their perspective of existence. Both the girls had felt the necessity of bearing up for their mother's sake, and each had endeavored to promote forced cheerfulness by activity, Violet in the line of household duties, and Constance by a renewal of her charitable work in co-operation with Mrs. Short ; and each was as busy as a bee. Constance tried literally not to be idle a single moment, after the example of her preceptress ; and such time as she was not able to spend with her mother, or in furthering the cause of charity or education, was employed in reading, so that her thoughts need never be unoccupied for a single moment. But though she flatters herself to be able in this wise to shut out the self-communings of a bitter and perplexing kind which beset those whose hearts are sore, and who scarcely know what

they believe concerning anything, she soon recognized that though activity can keep at bay, it cannot quell, save by a long experience, the murmurs of the soul ; especially where, as in her case, there was nothing connected with her own future to irradiate, as with an occasional sunbeam, the bank of clouds. On the contrary, the future looked gray and vapid, with no hope beyond a doubt, that could hardly be called a hope, interwoven with the destinies of one Percy White, concerning whom she had heard nothing, and concerning whom, inasmuch as she had deliberately refused to accept him as a lover, she, naturally, did not choose to make inquiries.

Accordingly, though she seemed so brisk and cheery and untiring, and though she declared that she never felt stronger in her life, when Mrs. Short once or twice suggested that she was looking thin, it was not altogether strange that, one night, about six months after Mr. Carleton's death, Bill was awakened by her, after midnight, with the request that he would go for the doctor. She said she had not been able to sleep and was in great pain. She looked white as a ghost, and her brother, having led her back to her room and aroused Sophia, hastened for the physician.

When Bill returned, he found her with chattering teeth and trembling from head to foot.

"I cannot help it, Bill, really," she said, piteously, fearing lest her inability to control her nerves would strike him as unnecessary. This was evident even to so firm a believer in the power of the individual over the will as he. Moreover, the doctor, when he arrived, showed by the celerity with which he called for brandy and red pepper, that he recognized there was nothing

make-believe in her condition. So much was the contrary the case that the next day she had lost all her strength and was in such a complete state of exhaustion that the slightest exertion was an effort.

"The matter with her?" echoed the doctor, in answer to Violet, who, anxious to know the truth, followed him down-stairs. "The same that is the matter with so many of you young ladies. She has been living on her nerves, and has given out; that is all. She has, evidently, been over-doing for some time, which, coupled with the shock of her father's death, has prostrated her nervous system. Anæmia, we doctors call it, which means a lack of the red corpuscles of blood. She must eat more, sleep more, and rest all the time."

It was a month before Constance was able to leave her room, and nearly a year elapsed before she ceased to be an invalid, during which time she was faithfully tended by her mother and Violet. Mrs. Carleton was anxious, naturally, at the slowness of her progress, and hung over her couch with solicitude that strove to foresee her every wish. Upon Violet, in these days, devolved a general supervision of the household, including her mother herself. The more she had to do, the better it suited her; and, unlike Constance, she showed no signs of tiring. As she moved about the house in her plain black dress, which showed to perfection the outline of her shapely, well-knit figure, performing her duties with a grave, impassive face, she suggested in some measure one of Millet's peasants. At least the comparison occurred to Mrs. Short, who was constantly at the house to inquire for her dear disciple. Of Violet, Mrs. Short had hitherto seen but little. Now, however

they were thrown much together by force of their common interest in Constance's well-being.

"Tell me, my dear," said Mrs. Short one day, when the invalid seemed to be making but slight headway, "has she anything on her mind that I do not know of?"

The doctor had asked the same question and been answered in the negative, and Violet shook her head this second time without reply, but she let her eyes fall slightly as she did so, which movement was not lost on her questioner, who waited a moment, and then said :

"How about that young man? Percy White, I mean," she added, since Violet made no response, but still kept her eyes down.

Then Violet, after a short hesitation, looked her in the face, and said :

"I know nothing of my own knowledge, Mrs. Short. Constance has never breathed a syllable to me on the subject, but my idea is that she liked him, and—and I hoped he liked her."

"Liked her? He was dead in love with her. Whether he actually asked her and was refused, or whether he went away without asking her, because of his father's business troubles, I have not been able to make out, but something or other took place while I was abroad. I am certain of that, for Constance, since my return, has never let me mention his name, and Ben, whom I have tried to catechise, is close as an oyster. My own firm belief is that each is in love with the other."

"Thank Heaven for that," murmured Violet.

Mrs. Short looked at her with quick surprise, not appreciating for a moment why she should speak so intensely, and then remembering that some one had

written to her in Japan that the second Miss Carleton was wearing the willow for young Randolph Davis, a whole flood of light was let in upon the complete change in Violet's ways, which she had ascribed solely to Mr. Carleton's death.

"You would approve of the match, then?" she asked, deeming it best to seem not to notice the direct significance of the speech.

"If she likes him, and—and if he is worthy of her."

"Two large 'ifs,' my dear. But, provided my conjecture is correct, and your surmise fortifies me in it, the first one is answered already. As for the second, I believe in Percy. He has been volatile and foolish, I dare say, and if Constance did refuse him, it was because she thought so, poor, dear, conscientious child. But if he is the man I believe him to be, he will make his way out West, and come back and marry her. Is there any news of him?"

"Ben had a letter—the first one he has received—day before yesterday. Percy wrote that he had been promoted, and seemed in good spirits. It was very short."

"Did you tell her?"

"Not yet. I was trying to decide what was best. I shall tell her now," said Violet; then, after a pause, she added, "Constance would make a man very happy."

"Yes, she ought to be married. She is meant for a loving wife; whereas, she fancies herself cut out to be a philanthropist and a world-worker. The poor dear has not the strength—she would worry herself to death in a year or two. Drudgery of that kind is meant for people who have no nerves, or else whose nerves are all

steel, like mine. We are not really half so useful as the others."

Violet looked at her for a moment wistfully, then she said :

"I was going to speak to you about that matter, as regards myself, Mrs. Short. For the moment, of course, I have Constance to look after ; but, as soon as she is well, I feel that I should like to interest myself in something worth while. I have no nerves, either, or, at least, I am never conscious of them."

Mrs. Short cast an admiring glance at the girl's fine figure, and answered, in her brisk way :

"I understand. What is it you want to do?"

"I do not know. I want advice as to what I could do best."

"Let me see."

The little lady frowned reflectively. She was interested. Here was a wounded spirit that needed to forget, or, if it could not live down its sorrow, dull its edge by occupation.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-one."

"Humph! You are not very bookish, I believe."

"I could study if it were necessary, but I am not fond of books, as Constance is. I prefer to be busy with my hands."

"Precisely. How would you like to be a hospital nurse?"

Violet's eyes brightened.

"I had not thought of that. Could I?"

"You are strong and handy ; you move quietly, and you don't get flustered easily," continued Mrs. Short, with

a reflective air. "I don't see why you wouldn't make an excellent one. It is hard work, but that is what you are seeking for, I take it."

"Provided it is interesting, I don't care how hard it is."

"Very good, then. We must speak to Dr. Shortbridge."

This was the name of the doctor attendant on Constance. He was a man of forty-five, in active practice, keen-eyed, and incisive in his manner. He was the visiting physician at several of the institutions with which Mrs. Short was connected, and they were on friendly terms.

"Have I noticed her?" he echoed, in response to an inquiry from the lady in question, made a few days after this conversation with Violet. "I should think I had. She is a Hebe. And you say she wishes to become a nurse?" He wrinkled his brows. "She is too good-looking."

"But haven't you told me a dozen times that patients in the hospital object to ugly faces."

"Yes; but everything in reason. Why, my dear Mrs. Short, Miss Carleton wouldn't be a nurse three months before she was engaged to be married."

"Which shows, Doctor, that you're not so clever a man as I supposed you to be. In this age of the world, it isn't a woman's beauty, but the lack of it, that makes her in a hurry to get married. I will go bail for this one."

"You mean?" he queried, in a mysterious tone that implied he was willing to be let into a secret.

"I mean that barring accidents, she is likely to keep mankind at bay for years to come."

"What do you call accidents, pray?" said the physician, smiling, and none the less inclined to be gracious because he had been put off.

Accustomed by long experience to hear one woman tell another woman's secrets, his heart warmed toward one who could resist the temptation.

"I mean just what you doctors mean when you say that barring accidents, the patient will recover. The unexpected may always happen in love as in convalescence."

"You are a sad case," said the physician. "Whenever your proselyte is ready to begin her apprenticeship, I will try to provide for her."

This was not for several months, but the prospect of entering the hospital made Violet's horizon brighter. In the past year she had drifted completely away from her former life and friends, even from Ethel, with whom, despite her affair with Randolph, she had tried to preserve the same intimacy. But, though Ethel did her share in the way of coming to see her after the Carletons moved from the house next door, there was less and less in common between them every time they met. Ethel was still in the whirl of social life, and interested in its doings, of which Violet was now deliberately ignorant, and it seemed to Violet that her old friend had lost her spirits, and was much less interesting than formerly. Ethel was charitable enough to ascribe this to Mr. Carleton's death; but, though she made every effort to be sympathetic, she could not prevent

herself from being bored by Violet's continued seriousness of demeanor.

Violet, in her turn, realized that Ethel found her dull, and she tried to make an effort to appear less so, but it was of no use; she could not grow lively over the details of balls and dinner-parties and the tittle-tattle of society. So they had gradually drifted apart, though neither would have admitted that she was less fond of the other. Moreover, they were loyal to each other. The worst that Ethel ever said of Violet—and then, only to a bosom friend—was that she was a little morbid, poor thing; and Violet, though, perhaps, she wondered how Ethel could find continued amusement in society, and judged her accordingly as a little frivolous, never said so aloud.

It was a great relief to Violet to learn that Mrs. Short believed Percy to be true to Constance, and the allusion to Ben in connection with the matter, was a new source of satisfaction. She had thought once or twice of mentioning the subject to Ben, knowing his intimacy with Percy; but the remembrance of her own agonies had made her slow to disclose a secret which, if what she dreaded were correct, ought to be kept sacredly from every one. Her own experience had made her suspicious of men, and, perceiving Constance to be oppressed as by a weight, the fear had occurred to her, though she hated to give it bosom-room, that Percy had been merely amusing himself. But when she thought it over she had tried to believe, as a more probable alternative, that he had been dissuaded from speaking by his father's losses, and that her sister, either guessing this, or uncertain as to what he might feel, was unhappy.



VIOLET AND BILL'S CONVERSATION CONCERNING THEIR BROTHER HAROLD.—*See Page 230.*

But now she thought it best to mention the matter to Ben. Accordingly, she took him aside that evening and broached her anxiety.

Ben listened with a knowing smile, and when she had finished, said :

"Of one thing you may rest assured, Violet, which is that Percy, before he went away, was thoroughly in love with Constance. You mustn't ask me how I know or why I know, but I do know it for a fact ; and—and I see no harm in saying that Constance was aware of it."

"That takes a great load off my mind, Ben."

"As to anything between them since he went West—I know absolutely nothing, but I should be willing to wager a modest sum that his heart was true to Poll.

“‘No matter what you do,
If your heart is only true ;
And his heart *was* true to Poll,’”

he chanted, gayly.

"And how about Poll ?" said Violet.

"From what you have intimated, I judge that her heart is true to ‘hisn.’ Between ourselves," he continued, thoughtfully, "I’ve had a feeling that if Percy hadn’t been so helter-skelter in college she would have become engaged to him a year ago. There ! I’ve let the cat out of the bag. Well, seeing that you’re in the family, I don’t suppose Percy’ll mind ; and I might as well add that, though he went away without any hope, apparently, he vowed he was going to turn over a new leaf and win her in the end ; and, somehow, I have the feeling he will."

"Then hadn't you better let her see his letter?" suggested Violet, falteringly.

"I was wondering whether it wouldn't be a good plan. The doctor has said she wasn't to be agitated in any way, and I didn't like to take the responsibility, not knowing exactly how she did feel."

"I don't believe it would do her any harm," said Violet, quietly. "In fact—" she stopped short for a movement, then she added earnestly, "I realize that it is taking a great deal on one's self to meddle in matters of this kind, and if I didn't feel very certain, I wouldn't have suggested it. I should hate Constance to think that we were interfering in her affairs."

"Women are born match-makers," he could not resist saying.

"Don't, Ben."

"Meddling? Of course it isn't meddling, my dear sister. If she doesn't care for him, the letter will produce no more effect on her than water on a duck's back, and if she does, why, there's certainly no harm in letting her know how he is getting along. We should be inhuman not to."

"Yes, that is my idea. After all, it is only letting her know the facts, though I can't help feeling rather like a conspirator."

The letter was shown to Constance the next day, and the conspirators were rewarded by seeing that she seemed decidedly brighter; so much so, that Violet suggested to Ben to answer Percy's letter as soon as possible, in the hope of evoking another, which he proceeded to do forthwith.



CHAPTER XXV.

HOME TROUBLES.

Another subject of Violet's solicitude at this period was Harold, who, as is apt to be the case with the younger members of families, had grown up sooner than was expected. He was eighteen, and, though still at school, his appearance and tastes were those of a precocious youth. A fringe of luxuriant whiskers adorned his cheeks, and his principal interest in the day-time seemed to be to escort young women of his acquaintance to and from school. This was all very well, but he evinced, to boot, a disposition to be out at night much oftener than seemed fitting for one so immature. Owing to the absorption of the family in Constance's condition, his habit of straying out after supper passed unnoticed for some time. Bill was likely to be busy with his music, to which he was still faithful in the evening, or was often out himself, and Ben, if he were not visiting some artistic crony for mutual sympathy and enlightenment, or hobnobbing with Mr. Short, was capable of becoming so wrapt in a book as to be oblivious to everything else. So, while Mrs. Carleton and Violet, who commonly sat in Constance's room for an hour or so before they left her for the night, supposed

him to be studying, Master Harold got into the way of slipping out unperceived, to amuse himself with three or four young men of his own age. Violet was the first to discover this. After it had been going on for a fortnight or so, she happened to come down one evening about half-past eight, with a view of keeping her brothers company, and perceiving that Harold was absent, inquired where he was. Ben, who was the only one in the parlor, looked up from his book and then around the room as though he expected to see him there.

"I'm sure I don't know. He was here a little while ago. Perhaps he is studying in the dining-room."

He proved not to be, and the question as to his whereabouts was not answered until half an hour later, when he came in at the front door. Violet went out to meet him, exclaiming :

"Why, where have you been, Harold?"

"Out."

"But it is after nine o'clock."

"Is it?" he replied, in a tone that was partly suggestive of "What of it?" and yet designed to be a little guarded at the same time.

"But what have you been doing?"

"I've been at Charley Daggett's."

"Why, Harold, you've been smoking!" Violet exclaimed, in a tone of horror, scenting the odor of tobacco.

Harold looked embarrassed for an instant, then replied, doggedly :

"I don't see what business it is of yours, Violet, if I have."

"But you've no right to smoke at your age."

"Why not? I'm eighteen. Lots of the fellows do. Besides, I was only smoking cigarettes, any way."

He walked past her and went up the stairs, leaving Violet at a loss what to say or do ; for she had suddenly realized that Harold was no longer in swaddling clothes. and that he was disposed to resent her interference. To have a dispute with him would be to preclude the possibility of influencing him by kindly argument. After all, there was nothing very heinous in being out until nine o'clock, and she could not deny that he was eighteen. Nor, when she came to think of it, was there anything alarming in the bare act of smoking, except that Harold was still living at home, and therefore supposed to be in the nursery, so to speak, and unsophisticated. Bill smoked now, and Ben had smoked until recently, and she did not know when they had acquired the habit, but she did not believe it had been so early. The long and short of it was Harold was grown up, and it was necessary that he should be looked after, and something decided as to his future. Since he was no student and had shown no especial taste for anything, there had been talk of putting him into business after this year ; but her mother still persisted in regarding him as a mere baby—a delusion which they had all more or less adopted.

While Violet was thus cogitating, seated on a hall chair, the rattle of a key in the lock of the front door announced the arrival of Bill.

"Holloa, Violet! What are you doing here?"

"Thinking. I came down a little before nine, and found that Harold wasn't at home. When he came in, he said he had been at Charley Daggett's and he owned

up to smoking cigarettes. When did you begin to smoke, Bill?"

"I never smoked until after I was twenty-one. Father advised me not to, so I didn't."

"Harold is eighteen. Don't you think, Bill, that the best thing to do would be to put him right into your office this summer? Mother can't afford to send him to college, and she doesn't realize how old he really is."

"I'll have to take him in hand. I've been thinking so several times lately," answered Bill, emerging from the coat closet, whither Violet had followed him. "I don't fancy the crew he travels with. That Charlie Daggett is a low-lived specimen. I'll give Harold a good talking-to. If he comes into my office he'll have to make up his mind to quit fooling and stick to his work."

"Of course. I've no doubt he will, Bill. As soon as he feels that there is real responsibility on his shoulders he will take a more serious view of things."

"I don't know about that. He has been indulged all his life, and got so into the habit of doing what he chooses, that he'll find it difficult to do what other people choose. He was spoiled years ago. If as a little boy he had been made to mind, as the rest of us were, he would have been very different to-day."

Violet was silent for a moment. She could not deny that there seemed to her much truth in this last statement. Then she said :

"But at any rate we ought to do all we can for him now."

"I'm going to. I'll take him into the office, and if he shows himself worth his salt he'll have plain sailing. I was merely prophesying what I feared, judging from

the past. You know perfectly well he was spoiled. You've said so yourself often enough."

"Yes, I think that he ought to have been made to obey better when he was a little fellow," Violet answered, with a sigh. "He was the youngest, though, and we all laughed at whatever he did, and encouraged him to be mischievous because he was amusing. I've sometimes thought that by the time mother and father got to him they were worn out with hammering away at the rest of us, and hadn't the energy for another encounter."

"There's something in that," laughed Bill. "We were a pretty troublesome lot to manage."

"Harold, besides being attractive, is naturally very smart, and if he will only put his mind into whatever he has to do, he will do well. For my part, I'll try to see more of him, and do what I can to keep him straight; but you must promise me, Bill, not to speak about his smoking unless you see him smoking yourself, for I don't wish him to think I am bearing tales to you, or he will hate me."

Bill promised this, on the understanding that she was to reason with him on the subject, and induce him to smoke openly, if at all; and he himself undertook to have a talk with him regarding the office.

As a result of these negotiations, Harold became a clerk with Carleton & Hazard the following October, having previously listened without impatience to counsel of a downright kind from his eldest brother and exhortation from Violet that was meant to beget confidence. Although he took little pains to be attentive to the old lady, he was still in the good graces of Cousin Rebecca,

who had him pay her occasional visits at Hampton, from which he was apt to return jingling coin in his pocket, a circumstance, as Ben said, trifling in itself, but sadly significant as foreshadowing her testamentary intentions.

With the autumn, too, Violet began a course of instructions at the hospital, where she was obliged practically to live. Constance, though still delicate, was able to be about, and to attend to the ordinary duties of the household, so far as her mother would allow her to do so.

Constance's illness had given Mrs. Carleton a second lease of life, reviving in large measure the energy which her husband's death had apparently extinguished forever. She watched over the invalid with the eye of a lynx, and was fain to wait upon her devotedly, a state of affairs against which the invalid rebelled, so far as she was able. It was in the nature of a bitter blow to Constance that Violet should be given up to good works and she obliged to sit with folded hands; but she was quick to recognize that her happiness must be found in patient resignation, so that she was able, presently, to discuss the situation with her sister and Mrs. Short, without letting her disappointment be too obvious. She questioned Violet eagerly as to all that went on at the hospital, and declared herself only waiting until she were really strong to emulate her example in some other field of usefulness.

In answer to this declaration of what she intended to do when she should be restored, Mrs. Short would shake her head smilingly; and one day, after Constance was

feeling and looking a good deal like her old self, she hazarded the following:

"One is enough in a family, my dear Con. It doesn't do to put all the domestic eggs in one basket. I have a sort of feeling that, so far as usefulness goes, you will be of more service beside the hearth than you would be in a hospital, on the lecture platform or on philanthropic committees, and that without the least disparagement to you, my dear. Woman's real place is at home after all, and those of us who stray outside are to be pitied rather than congratulated. We are, if not exactly monstrosities of the social order, as the other sex once dubbed us, nevertheless the least favored in that process of natural selection. A woman who can find her mission at home, and be happy there, is the ideal woman, after all, rather than the St. Theresa."

"But what is my mission?" murmured Constance. "At present there are mother and the boys; but—"

"If your present is occupied, why concern yourself with the future?" interjected Mrs. Short. "You have your mother and your brothers. *Voila tout.* When they no longer need you it will be time enough to look out for another situation. You have your books, which you love, and you can wait. The world needs quiet culture of mind and spirit as much as deeds. Old Milton said wisely:

‘They also serve who only stand and wait.’

Trite as the hills, Con, but ever true and new like them. Wait, my dear, and who knows what may happen!"

There was a roguish intonation in the closing sen-

tence that brought the flush of embarrassment to the girl's wan cheeks. It faded, and to it succeeded the tearful smile and firm lips of the self-accuser.

"I will try—try to be more patient," she said ; "but it is hard to feel that one's life is turning out so different from what one meant it to be."





CHAPTER XXVI.

HAROLD AS A TARTAR.

On his father's death, Bill had become full partner in Carleton & Hazard, and by this time he was virtually the mainstay of the firm, for Mr. Hazard was so far crippled by rheumatism as to be confined to the house, and his son, who was to succeed him eventually, was just learning the business. This son, whose name was Lemuel Hazard, had been taken into the office as clerk, some six months before Harold's introduction there, and these two youths both saw fit to mock at the head clerk, Mr. Sanborn, behind that gentleman's back, and scarcely to conceal their mirth at his foibles when in his presence. The head clerk was now far advanced in years ; he stooped noticeably, his head glistened like a billiard ball, and his gait was beginning to be tottering ; but he was faithful and punctual as ever, and his only interests still were the firm, in whose service he had worked for well nigh half a century, and his gold watch.

And yet the very traits which had inspired the respect and admiration of Bill aroused the risibilities of his two juniors, Harold and Lemuel, who became at once fast friends, made sport, day in, day out, of the venerable retainer and his timepiece, and his homilies on punctuality.

Mr. Sanborn, who had looked forward to training these scions of the old house, and who had found in Bill so docile and satisfactory a pupil, exhausted all the rhetoric at his command in endeavor to point out to them the value of thorough, conservative business methods, but his exhortations seemed to go in at one ear and out at the other. The boys did things in their own way, and speedily introduced various innovations in the daily routine which made the head clerk stand aghast. Harold, on the evening of the very first day, had remarked, casually, to Bill: "Who is that venerable-looking fossil you have at the office?" And though his brother had cut short his flippancy at the moment by downright praise of his old henchman, Harold had never seen fit to alter his estimate. The two new-comers spoke of him invariably as the "venerable fossil," which was abbreviated, for convenience, to the "v. f."

Disrespectful as this attitude was, there were a good many grains of truth in the criticism that Mr. Sanborn was behind the times in a variety of ways, and not only Mr. Sanborn, but the firm. Old, conservative business methods have to be overhauled every decade or so, to prevent the establishment where they are rigidly observed from becoming outstripped in the commercial race, and sometimes mere youths, whose experience and judgment are as naught, are the first to perceive the necessity. Certainly, Carleton & Hazard made but little money in the first eighteen months after the death of the senior partner, and yet the firm had pursued precisely the same course as for years past. There were no very heavy losses, but somehow the profits did not accumulate as they had been wont to do. It was

an anxious period for Bill. He was disposed, naturally, to think that his business acumen was at fault, but neither Mr. Hazard nor Mr. Sanborn could point out where he had failed to observe the traditions of the house, and sound, commercial principles. He pondered and worried and fumed, and then at last it began to dawn upon him that the trouble might be that there were quicker and better methods of doing the same business, and that his was no longer what is called a "live concern." He had already perceived, by studying the books, that the profits had begun to fall off in the year prior to his father's death, which betokened that he was not necessarily to blame for the subsequent shrinkage; and by one consideration and another, he was led to perceive that the affairs of the firm needed a thorough revision.

While in this state of perplexity, Bill found the covert allusions to old fogy ways, which Harold, and, to some measure, Lemuel, ventured to give vent to in his presence, highly exasperating. As Violet had foretold, Harold had been seized with a sudden ambition to distinguish himself as a business man. He had put aside boyish interests, and he wore already the airs of a young Napoleon of finance. Lemuel, who lacked initiative, but was an excellent imitator, hung upon his words, and together they were prepared, after a year's service in the office, to conduct any business under the sun. Bill chafed and pulled at his lip savagely in watching and listening to them, especially as he was beginning to recognize that, despite the arrant nonsense they talked, there was, so far as Carleton & Hazard were concerned, considerable truth in their strictures. Harold reminded

him of himself at the same age in the air of importance which he had assumed, with this very vital difference that he had been willing to respect and follow the advice of others, whereas Harold thought he knew it all from the start. Violet had not foretold a development precisely of this kind. Nor, it must be confessed, did down-town influences tend to sober Harold's tastes in other respects. Now that he was a man in business, he had a right, so he claimed, to come and go in the evenings as he saw fit, and he further saw fit not to change his companions. Instead of throwing over Charley Daggett for Lemuel Hazard, he introduced Lemuel to Charley, and added another pal to a crew whose time after business hours was habitually wasted in idle living.

At the time when Violet went away to the hospital, she made Constance acquainted with her misgivings regarding Harold, and her sister had promised to keep an eye on him. Violet had been successful enough in ingratiating herself with him and establishing terms of confidence up to a certain point; but whenever she attempted to reason with him seriously, Harold would devote his energies to making her laugh, and so avoid the continuation of wearisome topics by promising to show improvement, with a jest on his lips. The same tactics proved futile with Constance. She had undertaken the responsibility with the gravest interest, and was not to be thwarted by badinage or diverted by amusing digressions. As a consequence, Harold became irritated at first, then bland and secretive, and finally, when he found himself unable either to offend or hoodwink her, he was presently touched by her sis-

terly devotion, and declared his gratitude. His contrition was entirely genuine; with breaking voice he vowed to give up his evil courses with every intention of doing so. From this hour he idolized Constance though they had really but little in common. Indeed, it was because she seemed to him of such different clay that he was ready to adore her. Before the world he continued to be volatile and bumptious, but he was ever willing to listen submissively to what she had to say.

As regards actual conduct, too, he appeared to her evidently to make an effort to keep straight. Constance had been quick to perceive that affection for her was the sole influence that would deter him from yielding to self-indulgence; and without nagging him, she endeavored to let him see that her interest never flagged. She could not tell certainly what he did when he was away from her; but he passed some of his evenings at home, and he was always eager on such occasions to hold a skein of wool for her or to read to her, or otherwise to be employed in her service. Constance judged, however, that he must continue to associate to some extent with Charley Daggett and his other old cronies, from the fact that he alluded to them as little as possible.



CHAPTER XXVII.

"THE CHARIOT RACE."

While Constance was thus interesting herself in Harold, Violet, Bill and Ben were severally much absorbed in their respective pursuits. The house seemed very quiet. Violet was so busy at the hospital that she was but rarely at home ; Bill went down town early and returned late ; his anxious brow rarely relaxed, and he was evidently in no mood for sociability. As for Ben, he was so wrapt in his art that he begrudged the hours necessary for eating and sleeping.

In deciding definitely to be an artist, Ben had reached a general rather than a particular conclusion ; he had vowed to devote himself to art as a mistress, but it had still remained for him to select the especial branch of his calling in which he hoped to excel. He had entertained successive visions of himself as a portrait painter, a landscape painter, a painter of the ideal or a delineator of realism, with the feeling that he would try his hand at each kind as soon as he got fairly to work, and determine accordingly the direction of his subsequent endeavor. Although his sketches were what had originally attracted Mr. Short's attention, and although at the suggestion of that same gentleman, he began to



"THE CHARIOT RACE."—FROM MONTH TO MONTH BEN WORKED UNRELENTINGLY.—See Page 241.

study carefully the principles of drawing, he began naturally, too, to thrill with the hope of doing something excellent with paint. He yearned to stand before a broad canvas with palette and brush, and produce a masterpiece. Although he had now and then done little bits, both in water-color and oil, he had never fairly tried to paint a good-sized picture. He therefore devoted his chief energies to learning the value of color, and before many weeks had elapsed he had conceived and begun a piece of work with which he trusted to carry the community by storm. The subject was an ambitious one—a Roman chariot race—and it was with the greatest secrecy that he smuggled the necessary expanse of canvas into the house so that no one should suspect what he was up to.

As a studio, he had fitted up a room in the attic, enlarging the window in the roof in such a manner as to let in abundant light, and there he shut himself up a such times as he was in the house. He refused to admit any one to this sanctum after he had begun operations on the masterpiece ; and to make sure that his secret was not divulged, he locked the door of the room whenever he went away. Not even to Mr. Short, and much less to any of his family, did he give a hint as to what he was doing, and, although there was some curiosity occasioned in the household by his refusal to allow admission, it was supposed that he felt reluctant to have his first efforts scrutinized.

From month to month Ben worked unrelentingly, and out of chaos he perceived his subject gradually assume form. He eagerly ransacked books of history and encyclopedias in order to reproduce exactly the costume

and spirit of the Roman age ; and pored over prints to ascertain every detail of costume, harness, armor and architecture. Regarding the merit of his picture he went through successive phases of intoxicating hope and clammy discouragement. One day he felt that he had won fame beyond all question, but on the next may be the canvas would seem fairly to bristle with defects and insipidity. He had certainly treated his theme boldly. The spectator saw the two chariots dashing toward him abreast of the goal, one but a hair's breadth in advance of the other, the driver of which stood urging with uplifted thong, his foaming horses to win the race already lost. Above the goal arose the surging tiers of the amphitheatre, half-veiled by the group of ruler and officials in the foreground. For the representation of this spectacle he had employed a canvas seven feet long and three feet high.

Meantime, at the school of design, where he worked at regular hours—for his masterpiece was really the product of his spare time—he could perceive that he was making progress in the use of his pencil, and supplementing his hitherto untutored skill by scientific and accurate knowledge. He appreciated that proficiency in drawing would be of immense service to him in his future work, which he was sure now would be the painting of large pictures. Did not one hear it said of many a promising artist that his skill in the use of color was neutralized by his inability to draw correctly ? On this account, heretofore, he continued to take an interest in sketches, but he professed to think very little of them on their own account. They were all very well, but he aimed higher. Now and then, when he chanced

to be in fine spirits, and something struck his sense of the ludicrous, he would dash off at his desk, with a few bold strokes, a cartoon that was passed from hand to hand among his fellow-students and admired for its cleverness. But Ben saw fit to laugh disdainfully when congratulated on these offsprings of his fancy, as though he considered them very small potatoes.

It was more than a year and a half after he had entered the Academy of Design that "*The Chariot Race*" neared completion. Ben had been about nine months at work upon it, and he had begun to be very impatient to get it done. His funds were very low ; he had only a few dollars left of the one hundred and nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents, and he had gleaned from Bill's face and allusions by his mother that the family finances were at low ebb. Uncertain as he still was as to the merit of his work, there were moments when he could not help feeling transported by the hope of coming to his mother's rescue with the proceeds of a sale that would relieve them all from uneasiness for the time being, and would give assurance of future income. How glorious it would be to dispose of "*The Chariot Race*" for a handsome sum in cash that would enable him to smile triumphantly at Bill ! Why not ? Other men had leaped to the front as artists at their first venture, and why should not he ?

So alternately elated with hope and bowed down by doubt did Ben become as the picture approached completion, that he resolved at last to make a confidant of one person. This was his old friend Harrison Fay, who, after graduating at the Scientific School as a civil engineer, had fixed upon electrical engineering as a

specialty, and was established in town. He and Ben were renewing with gusto their intimacy, which had almost necessarily languished under the ordeal of letter-writing, and were fighting over again, face to face, during the walks they took together on Sundays, and at such times as they could spare from their work, the problems concerning which they had disputed so ardently on paper three years ago. Harrison, after being infatuated by numerous branches of science, had become absolutely enthralled by the problems of electricity, and was eager to distinguish himself by some discovery in the field where all sorts of possibilities seemed open. He had developed into a broad-shouldered, powerful-looking man, with a deep bass voice and a dark beard, and he was just the same height as Ben, who was still thin and spindly, though tougher than ever, as he himself was proud to declare. Nothing delighted Harrison more than to take the train to Hampton or some other suburb on a holiday, and ramble with Ben, as they had used to do when they were boys, observing nature and discussing their mutual interests.

It was in the course of one of these jaunts that Ben, who had been tempted more than once to confide his secret to his old friend, let the cat out of the bag. Harrison was appropriately cordial on the subject, and expressed curiosity to see "The Chariot Race" at the first opportunity.

"I will let you see it only on one condition," said Ben, "which is that you will promise, on your word of honor, to tell me exactly what you think of it. If you don't like it, I wish you to tell me so."

Harrison agreed to the condition, saying :

" You're welcome to my opinion, such as it is, Ben. I know very little about pictures, anyway. I merely know whether I like a picture or whether I don't, but I can't give reasons ; and if another fellow were to declare me all wrong, I couldn't prove I wasn't ; so I don't see that I can help you much. But I'm impatient to see your *magnum opus*, and I've no doubt it is a hummer."

" *I've* a great deal of doubt about it. Sometimes I feel that it looks pretty well, and then, again, it reminds me of a chromo."

It was agreed that Harrison should come to the house on the following day, at a time when the light was most favorable for the inspection. All the next morning Ben felt too nervous to work, and awaited his friend's arrival with feverish impatience. He felt that if Harrison were enthusiastic, he might venture to let "*The Chariot Race*" be seen by Mr. Short. Harrison was punctual, and having mounted the stairs to the studio, found himself, when he entered, confronting a broad expanse of cotton cloth with which Ben concealed his master-piece from possible scrutiny through the keyhole. Ben carefully locked the door, and giving Harrison a chair, the only one in the apartment, established himself on the edge of a soap-box, in which he kept some of his painting apparatus.

" I say, old fellow," remarked the visitor, who seemed to be chewing the cud of reflection, as he took the proffered seat, " I suppose that was one of your sisters whom I met as I came upstairs? Tall, with dark hair."

" Yes, my sister Violet."

"I shouldn't have known her. It's a good long while since I've seen her. She is very handsome, Ben."

"I think so myself. She's in the hospital ; one of the nurses, you know. She has been there a year and a half, and she is absorbed in the work."

"You don't mean so." Harrison was pensive a moment, then he said : "Rather a different life than balls and dinner-parties, which is the life so many girls lead."

"Violet did her fair show of those in her day," answered Ben. "But she found, like the rest of us, as she grew older, that she needed a real interest of some kind to make her happy, and I think she has found it."

"I see." Harrison whistled softly in an abstracted manner and tapped the wooden floor with his cane ; but suddenly realizing that he had come there for a purpose, he looked up and said : "Well, let's see the show."

"You remember your promise ?" replied Ben, who was sitting with folded arms on the edge of the soap-box. "You will tell me on your word of honor what you think of it ?"

"Aye, aye."

Ben arose, and standing in front of the large canvas, whisked off the covering and displayed "The Chariot Race." Instead of looking at his friend, he walked a few paces beyond the picture and deposited the sheet in the corner. For an instant he stood waiting as though expecting to hear something, then he turned and regarded Harrison. Harrison was looking intently at the picture with a compression of the lips that made

Ben's heart stand still. He seemed to be striving for something to say and just then he said it :

"It is very—er—interesting, Ben—very. I should think you had reproduced the effect of a chariot race exactly. Yes, it is certainly very interesting."

Their eyes met at the moment, and Ben, turning abruptly, walked toward the soap-box.

"Thanks," he answered, in a quiet, short tone.

There was another pause ; then Harrison said again :

"I think that it has a great many excellent points, and that the subject is a capital one."

"You mean by that you think it is a complete failure. Why don't you say so ?"

Harrison flushed to the roots of his hair at the sound of these deliberate words spoken behind him. For an instant he made no response ; then, still looking at the picture as though he were striving to hit upon some feature of merit with which to refute this bald assertion, he replied :

"I do not think so at all, Ben. I—I think it has a great many fine points. I do, indeed," he added, facing around to meet the gaze of the unhappy artist, who, however, squatted on the soap-box, was looking dejectedly at the floor, with his cheeks between his hands.

"You may not think, perhaps, that it is the worst picture you have ever seen in your life ; I am sure myself that it isn't, but you can't deny that you don't think very much of it. You have the same as told me so already."

Harrison could fairly have said that he had never been so uncomfortable in his life. For an instant or two there was a conflict in his mind between the instinct

of truth and that of pity for the friend whose illusions his lukewarm verdict was so ruthlessly dispelling ; but the conviction that to be frank was the truest friendship prevailed so far in the end that he replied :

"If you mean, Ben, whether I think it one of the finest pictures I have ever seen—or—that it will make your eternal reputation, well, I must admit, that I do not. But I may be entirely mistaken about that, as I told you the other day. That it has plenty of merit though, it seems to me every one will agree ; and while, if I am right, it may not—er—take the world by storm, it is certainly, as a first attempt, decidedly creditable."

The words were uttered as though they had been wrenched from his lips. When he came to a pause there was a painful silence.

"Thanks," said Ben, again ; but this time the irony of his tone was tempered by mournful humility.

"You know you made me promise to tell you exactly what I thought," said Harrison, who was alive to the bitterness of it.

"I did, and you have acted like a man. I'm not blaming you, Harrison, don't think for a moment. I am grateful to you. But I—I can't help feeling a little disappointed. I've worked at it so long and so hard that I cannot bear to think it isn't good. But you're right—I can see it now, myself."

"I feel like a brute, old fellow. My opinion isn't worth a button, as far as criticism goes. It may be I'm completely wrong."

Ben interrupted him with an impatient gesture and continued :

"No, you're perfectly right. It's plain enough to me now, and I ought to have seen it before. I did realize it sometimes, but then the glamour would blind my eyes. Now I can see as well as you or any one else that it's a mere daub."

"Not that, Ben, at all."

"Oh, well, it may be as you say, creditable as a first attempt, but even as to that I have my doubts. It is painstaking and faithful and all that, but it lacks the something which makes a picture a picture. It is painstaking, but it is commonplace. In short, it's a chromo—yes, a chromo," he repeated, with a sort of fierce jubilation.

Harrison made no answer, but prodded with his cane at a crack in the floor, seeking, perhaps, for fitting words of encouragement. The next moment, Ben, with an impetuous "here goes, then," had snatched up a brush, and, plunging it into a pot of paint, was in the act of rushing upon his masterpiece with furious intent, when his arm was stayed.

"What are you trying to do, Ben? Stop! Are you crazy?"

Checked by Harrison's grasp from further progress, he was yet able to hurl the brush with impetus. His aim was so far disturbed, however, that it missed the central figures which it was intended to mar, and struck merely one corner of the canvas, which it spattered with a few black drops. Harrison, with his arms about Ben's neck, led him to the chair, on which he sank, covering his face with his hands, convulsed with anguish. For ten minutes he wept thus, while Harrison sat beside him holding his hand as a woman might have done.

When at last he looked up, it was with a sad, but firm smile, which shone like a rainbow through his tears.

"Well, that is over. But I am not beaten yet."

"Beaten? Not a bit of it, old man."

"But I mean to be an artist. I have it in me, Harrison. I may not succeed in one line, but I will in another. See if I don't!"

"I am sure of that, too. Dear old Ben! This has been one of the cruellest days of my life. Can you ever forgive me?"

"It was the part of a true friend to tell me the truth, and I should have hated you if you had deceived me. I am glad on the whole," he added, quietly, looking at the picture, "that you did not let me spoil it."





CHAPTER XXVIII.

BEN TRIES A NEW TACK.

When announcing to Harrison Fay his faith in himself, notwithstanding the downfall of his hopes regarding "The Chariot Race," Ben had spoken but vaguely. He had nothing specific in his mind; only an indefinite yet determined intention to succeed as an artist in spite of his first failure. He arose, therefore, on the following morning in a gloomy frame of mind. While under the influence of excitement, his fortitude had kept him up, but now that he was left to the bitterness of his own reflection, he felt a good deal like drowning himself. The strangest thing of all to him was that he had not perceived earlier the imperfections in his masterpiece. How commonplace and mediocre it was! And yet, until Harrison's inability to dissemble had unsealed his eyes, he had fancied it to be possibly a great picture. Although no longer in a destructive mood, the sight of the canvas was painful to him, and he proceeded to dismount it from the easel and turn its face toward the wall.

At dinner that day, Violet, who was off duty, and so happened to be at home, inquired if the young man whom she had encountered on the landing the after-

noon before could possibly be Harrison Fay. She explained, laughingly, that, hearing his step on the stairs, she had supposed him to be one of her brothers, and had come out of her room to speak to him, and they had met face to face.

"How he has filled out, Ben," she continued, on learning that her supposition was correct. "He used to be almost as slender as you, but now he is decidedly broad-shouldered, to say nothing of his beard, which gives him quite an august appearance."

Although in no sense offended with his friend, Ben did not feel exactly in the humor to discuss him. The mention of Harrison's name only served to intensify the misery from which he was suffering; so he changed the subject as promptly as possible. That second night he slept little, chafing with mortification and discouragement; but he got up in the morning with a resolve to go to work again vigorously. Since he had failed in color, why should he not attempt something with his pencil? This would be less ambitious, but, after all, it was in the way of drawing that he had had practice, and was really tolerably proficient. The idea occurred to him when he was on his way to the School of Design, and before the day was over, he had become so cheerful that he found himself sketching a cartoon before he knew it. It was one of his off-hand sketches, and he worked at it as a sort of stimulus to his thoughts; but, curiously enough, one of his fellow-students who had admired his cleverness in this line before, and was looking over his shoulder, happened to remark:

"If I were able to do things like that, Carleton, I'd send them to a magazine."

Ben, who was struck by the idea, at once stopped, and said :

"What magazine? I don't understand."

"Oh, any of them. There are plenty, and their illustrations are half the time not so good as yours. I know a man who makes a very decent living by doing work of this kind, illustrating books and articles. You have an advantage, too, in being able to be humorous or serious, just as you feel inclined. I should think you'd go in for something of the sort."

Ben asked one or two more questions which showed he was interested, but his fellow-students little guessed how opportune was the suggestion, or how quickly it would be acted upon. Ben went home fired with the idea of doing something at once, stopping on the way at the public library to examine the various illustrated periodicals and papers. There were plenty of them to be sure, and he recognized with satisfaction some of the cuts were no better than what he thought he could do himself. Why had the idea never occurred to him before? He would prepare a sketch both in the serious and in the comic line straightway, and try his fortune as an illustrator.

Warned by his recent experience, Ben did not allow himself to become too hopeful; but he was conscious, as the new work progressed, of feeling very much more at home at it than he had felt when delineating "The Chariot Race." A week of careful industry sufficed for the completion of the two sketches, concerning which he was this time completely tongue-tied. In fear and trembling he dispatched them to different magazines and awaited the result. He had expected to hear from

them within a few days, but a fortnight passed without news from either, so that he began to be haunted by fears that they had never been delivered. Perhaps he had not put sufficient postage on them and they had gone to the dead-letter office. He remembered, too, having heard that the magazines were overrun with contributions, and that, without a well-known name or a letter of introduction from some one of note in a literary or artistic way, proffered matter was consigned to the waste-paper basket. Consequently oppressed by these and similar forebodings, Ben stalked about the house in a blue maze, unable to fix his mind on anything until he knew his fate. Of his two sketches, one was a political cartoon, the other an idyllic social study.

On the sixteenth morning, the postman brought him a missive that set him trembling like an aspen, for on the margin of the package appeared the name and scroll of one of the self-same magazines. Then suddenly it came over him that his contribution must have been returned. If otherwise, why this thick inclosure? A mere line would have sufficed had his sketch been acceptable. Clearly they had not been satisfied with it, and here it was back on his hands.

He undid with a sinking heart the seals which held the coarse wrapping-paper in place, and as he caught sight of the same card-board walls in which he had inclosed his social study to protect it from mutilation, his last ray of hope vanished. He had failed again.

Mechanically he went through the process of removing the sheets of card-board; but when he had done so he perceived an envelope lying inside next to his sketch. It was addressed to him, and he divined it to be a notice

from the editor declining his contribution. On opening it he perceived to his surprise that it was quite a long letter. What could this mean?

He read wonderingly, then eagerly. The letter was from the editor, and a kind, encouraging letter it was. The sketch was declined, it was true, as being unadapted to the magazine, for the reason, as the writer explained, that their articles were illustrated to order and that illustrations without accompanying text were consequently unacceptable. But, as he went on to say, he had been so much struck by the talent of the contribution that he felt the desire to see more of the artist's work, and if Ben were so disposed, he would send him an article to illustrate. In conclusion, he named terms for so doing that seemed to Ben in his penniless condition nearly fabulous, and asked for an immediate reply.

Ben felt like shouting for joy. Here was a beginning at last. He was practically engaged to do work for a magazine in return for real, actual money. With dancing eyes he read again and re-read the letter, scarcely trusting his own senses, and fearful either that there was some mistake, or that the apparently kind-hearted editor was in reality hurling at him subtle sarcasm. But there it stood in black and white. Moreover, in keeping with the adage that one piece either of good or bad fortune is apt to beget another, there arrived for him, the following morning, two letters, one of which he knew, from the handwriting, was from Percy White; the second he perceived to be from the comic periodical to which he had sent his political cartoon. It was a thin envelope, which could not possibly contain his sketch, so it was plain that it had not been returned. Within was

a single sheet of note-paper, out of which, as Ben unfolded it, a slip escaped and fluttered to the floor. The contents were eminently to the point. The editor begged to inclose his check for fifteen dollars, in payment for the political cartoon sent by Mr. Benjamin Fitch Carleton, and to solicit a second contribution.

Ben felt fairly delirious. Here was almost too much good fortune. He picked up the slip of paper in a dazed sort of fashion, and stared at it and the editorial announcement alternately. Then suddenly he dashed out of the room and up the stairs, crying :

“Mother! Mother! Con! Con!”

Constance overheard him, and opening the door of her room, came out to meet him.

“Oh, Con, it’s all right at last! See here ;” and he held out the check and the letter from the comic periodical. “And read this, too,” he added, thrusting his hand into his breast-pocket in search of the other editor’s letter. In so doing, he let that from Percy, which he had neglected to open, and which he had been holding in his hand, drop to the ground.

While Constance read the two letters, he chanced to spy the envelope at his feet, and picked it up, exclaiming :

“Here is a letter from Percy, too. I had quite forgotten it, in my excitement.”

“From Percy White?” inquired his sister, gently, though she guessed perfectly well who was meant. “This is glorious, Ben,” she continued, reverting to the letter of acceptance which she had just finished. “When do you suppose it will be published? Fifteen

dollars, too, and the prospect of more. How splendid ! And you kept it so dark."

"But that isn't all. Read the other, too."

While Constance perused the longer story, Ben lost himself in the contents of Percy's effusion. She interrupted him with further congratulations, in answer to which he cried, exultantly :

"Yes ; it's first-rate ; and you'll be pleased to hear, too, Con, that Percy has had another promotion. There's been a strike on the railroad where he is, and he seems to have behaved well and showed a good deal both of sense and firmness at the same time. I'm just in the middle of it. You shall see it in a minute. Here, look at this," he added, handing her a newspaper clipping which was inclosed. "It seems to be about the strike."

Constance took the paper with ill-concealed eagerness. Why did her hand tremble so ? It provoked her that it should even while she felt her heart bound as she read the complimentary language in which Mr. Percy White's promotion to be assistant superintendent of an important branch of the road was described. She drank in every word and had begun to read it over again when Ben broke in with :

"Holloa ! Here is a message for you, Con. 'Please give my kindest remembrances to your sister. She is forever—'" Ben stopped, awkwardly. "I guess the rest is intended for me alone. But," he went on, with a gay laugh and toss of his head, "you'd better hear it. 'She is forever in my thoughts ; I shall never forget her as long as I live.' There, sister mine, do you hear that ? The man is in love with you, and I prophesy that his

heart is fixed on coming back some day and trying to persuade you to be his wife. Sing hey to you ; good day to you ; and what have you to say ?”

Constance looked confused at this sally, and her nature prompted her to assume an air of dignity as she said :

“ Your success seems to have turned your head, Ben. I am delighted, of course, to hear of Mr. White’s promotion, and—I am glad that he has not altogether forgotten me. But I think you had better clip your imagination and draw the line there.” Then she saw fit to add, archly : “ Besides, it doesn’t follow because he says your sister that he means me. There are two of us, you know.”

“ Oh, doesn’t it !” cried Ben, who had been rather flabbergasted by her first words. “ You’re a fraud, Constance. That’s what you are ; a regular fraud. I suspected it before, and now I know it.”

“ Suspected what ?” she asked, with crimsoning cheeks and a half-pleased laugh.

“ That you’re a fraud—a pious fraud. Well, all I can say is I fervently hope it will come out all right. You have my entire blessing, if that’s what you are waiting for.”

Constance looked grave again.

“ I’m sure I don’t know, Ben, what you are talking about or what you mean. As I said before, your happiness has turned your head.”

“ Well, Con,” he replied, jubilantly, “ I do admit that for once I am really happy.”



CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PROPHESIED HAPPENS.

One morning, within a month after, Mrs. Carleton received a telegram announcing that Cousin Rebecca Hubbard had been struck with paralysis and was in an unconscious condition. No one of the children happened to be in the house at the time, so she set out alone for Hampton. But her visit was fruitless. Cousin Rebecca could recognize no one and died within an hour after the arrival of Mrs. Carleton, who reached home at night-fall with the news. The funeral took place two days later, and after it there was considerable quiet curiosity in the Carleton household as to what Cousin Rebecca had done with her money. If she had left no will Mrs. Carleton would be one of half a dozen nearest of kin to divide the property. But they were all agreed that Cousin Rebecca was too precise and particular a woman not to have settled her affairs.

"There's no doubt in my mind," said Ben, "that Harold will get the biggest slice, so far as we five are concerned. Father used to tell us not to covet anybody's money, and I can honestly disclaim—as can we all, for the matter of that—having ever raised a finger to propitiate the poor old lady. She didn't like us, and

we never took pains to win her over, which we might have done, had we been mercenarily inclined. As for Harold, he can't be accused of not having done his best to spoil his chances, when he called her a 'pouty swill-barrel.' It wasn't his fault that she took a fancy to him ever after. It only proves that it is better to be born lucky than rich. I will admit, though," he added, "that just at this stage of our impecuniosity a cool hundred or two—you see I am not grasping—would rejoice the soul of one member of this family. Proud as I am, I admit that it would come in handy."

"You bet your sweet life it would," said Bill, who spoke thus vigorously, from a realizing sense that the family finances were in sore need of replenishment.

"A few years ago," said Violet, "I should have been just crazy with curiosity. Well, I own," she continued, with a reflective laugh, "that I'm crazy with curiosity still, but it's more because I'm a woman, and wish to know what Cousin Rebecca has done with her fortune than because I have any great desire that she should leave it to me; I suppose it would be pleasant to be rich, and that if it were left to me I should take it—"

A general laugh interrupted this condescending remark before its completion, and Bill interjected :

"If I was to have it in case you refused it, I wouldn't give a copper coin for my chance."

Violet laughed.

"Well, I suppose I shouldn't actually refuse it when it came to the point. What I meant was that three years ago I thought there was nothing in the world worth having except money, and now I know that—well, that I'm not so dependent on it, that's all."

"Right you are, Vi," said Ben. "There's art and there's hospital work, if there's nothing else, and we'd rather be poor and follow our bents, than be the heirs to all Cousin Rebecca's money and do what we don't want to do. Amen say I."

"That's about it. But it was rather an idiotic remark for me to have made, all the same," she said, blushing with the consciousness of having unwittingly seemed to pose as a pattern of unworldliness. "I didn't mean, Bill, to point a moral. I was only thinking out loud, and congratulating myself on the prospect of not being so much cast down by the probable results, as I should have been if Cousin Rebecca had died when I was nineteen."

"We all understand what you meant, my darling, and I thank God that it is so," said her mother, pressing her hand affectionately; an action which brought the flush of pleasure to the cheek of Violet, in place of that caused by annoyance at a speech so unlike her usual utterances.

All uncertainty was brought to an end on the following day by the announcement that Cousin Rebecca had left a last will and testament, dated a year prior to her death, the terms of which had evidently been carefully considered. Cousin Rebecca had plainly wished to be just toward her kith and kin and yet follow her own inclinations at the same time. Of the six cousins, of which Mrs. Carleton was one, who stood in equal relationship to the testatrix, all were married and had children, some fifteen in number, including the five Carletons. Cousin Rebecca had seen fit to pass over the first generation entirely, and to leave to fourteen of these

fifteen descendants twenty-five hundred dollars apiece. The one omitted from this general class was Harold. To him she bequeathed the handsome sum of seventy-five thousand dollars. All the rest and residue of her property was divided between two charitable institutions. Her entire estate amounted to about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

There was naturally great excitement among the Carletons. Harold was congratulated heartily on his inheritance, which was none the less a surprise because it had been prophesied ; for, after all, everything had been mere conjecture as to what disposition Cousin Rebecca would make of her property. Insignificant as were their legacies in comparison with his, the others felt that they had cause to congratulate themselves on receiving anything whatever, so that there was general satisfaction, and a recognition that Cousin Rebecca had been more than liberal to their branch of the family. The twenty-five hundred dollars apiece had come most opportunely for Bill, and seemed to Ben a veritable windfall that was almost wealth. To be a capitalist possessed of interest-bearing securities was a condition of estate which Ben had never hoped to reach until the dim future, after years of toil ; yet here he was sure of one hundred and twenty-five dollars a year so long as he lived. How delightful to know that whenever he was in need of funds he had henceforth only to take out one of the three pieces of parchment covered with hieroglyphics which had been given to him, and cut off a little ticket called a coupon. Coupled with his previous good fortune, it seemed to him now that he was thoroughly in clover.



CHAPTER XXX.

HAROLD AS A NAPOLEON OF FINANCE.

Prior to the opening of the will, Harold rather indicated, by the complacent air with which he listened to the remarks of his brothers and sisters as to his prospects that he had hopes of getting something, if any of them did ; but evidently he had not expected a down-pour of this kind. He accepted the congratulations freely offered him at home and elsewhere with modest mien and as though he scarcely realized the significance of what had come to pass. This phase, however, did not last long ; and to it succeeded a mood of elation coupled with renewed self-importance and open-handed generosity. Toward Bill his manner waxed somewhat disdainfully patronizing, and toward Ben somewhat pitifully patronizing ; but he patronized his mother and sisters right royally. They should want for nothing ; they should have everything in the way of comforts that money could afford ; he would reestablish the family prosperity on a firm and liberal basis. As an earnest of this, he began by taking Constance and Violet to the theatre as often as they could be induced to go, made handsome gifts of jewelry to them on their

birthdays, and was prevented from presenting to his mother a *coupe* and horses only by her flat refusal to accept them.

"You are not rich enough, my son. I cannot think of it for a moment. One would suppose from the way you talk that you had inherited a million instead of seventy-five thousand dollars," protested Mrs. Carleton; but she was immensely touched by these manifestations of generosity on the part of her baby; and, indeed, there could be no denying that Harold was disposed to behave very handsomely.

For the first six months he found sufficient occupation in establishing his wardrobe and general personal expenditure on a scale consistent with his altered circumstances. To accustom himself to dress fashionably, smoke the best cigars and amuse himself about town without regard to cost required a certain amount of time, though he proved very apt at acquiring the necessary knowledge. So apt, indeed, that by the time he had become habituated to it he was induced to think of going into business not only by ambition but by the consciousness that, after all, he was not so very rich. This last idea became so potent that by the end of another month he was describing himself to be poor as a church-mouse. What were seventy-five thousand dollars? A mere drop in the bucket, a pittance, nothing more. But with it as a nest-egg, on the other hand, there was a chance to make one's mark in the world. The lumber business had been all very well in the past, and his father had derived an honest livelihood from it, but it was suffering from dry rot at the moment; and there was the paramount objection that even did it

recover from this, it was not the sort of business for an ambitious young man to follow nowadays. It might do for a plodder who would be content with a modest income, and had no ambition to shine socially. His ambition was to become a banker ; a stock-broker at the outset, and later, as he progressed, a banker. There was the calling which promised the most speedy and magnificent return, and the one which the cleverest men in the country were selecting.

These arguments were made by him in support of the announcement that he and Lemuel Hazard had formed a partnership to do business as stock brokers, and in response to the objections to the scheme raised by his eldest brother. Bill had up to this time refrained from interfering with Harold's course, although he considered him absurdly extravagant in view of the moderate size of his inheritance; but when this plan was announced, he hastened to protest, declaring that it was madness for two youngsters without business experience to risk their all in this wise. But he found himself in a minority of one. Even old Mr. Hazard was so far won over by the glowing representations of the two youths as to their prospects, that he withdrew objection to Lemuel's contributing to the joint enterprise twenty-five thousand dollars which had been left him by his mother; a circumstance which Harold used as a convincing argument in the family circle.

"That's all very well," said Bill, "but Mr. Hazard knows that even if the twenty-five thousand are lost, he has capital enough of his own to start Lemuel with afresh; but where would you be, Harold, if your seventy-five thousand were gone?"

"And why should it go any quicker than mother's money in the lumber business? I suppose you would like me to sink it in that, but I think it is just as well for us not to put all our eggs in one basket, thank you. I don't see that you are warranted by great results in assuming that you know such a terrible lot about business, anyway."

Bill glared at his traducer a moment, then shrugged his shoulders, and turned on his heel. He did not choose to demean himself by answering his angry brother. He felt that he had done his best to persuade Harold to be sensible, but he did not propose to be flaunted by a whipper-snapper in return for his good advice, especially as his mother and sisters seemed to be of the opinion that the conduct of a business of his own would have a steady influence on the would-be financier.

"I have said my say," Bill answered sternly, when Mrs. Carleton, who had listened to the conversation and reproved Harold after it for his lack of respect toward his brother, alluded to the subject anxiously that evening.

"Of course, I don't pretend to know about such things," she replied, "but I can't see really why there should be any great risk. Harold assures me that, in a strict commission business such as they intend to follow, the element of risk is exceedingly small. It is very improper in him to be impertinent to you, my dear, and I have told him so; but you know he does not really mean it; and, after all, the money is his, and it is only natural for a young man to wish to be independent. I should have been very glad if he had been content to join forces with you; but, seeing that he prefers to be

independent, I think he will be happier to be allowed to have his own way. Besides, there is something, as he says, in not putting all the family eggs into one basket."

To have to listen to insinuations reflecting on his own business capacity, in addition to being overruled, was bitter for Bill. From Harold's lips they were exasperating enough, but to be doubted ever so slightly by his mother cut him to the heart; all the more so because he realized that she had some reason to feel uneasy. Nevertheless, the conviction that he was in the right as to Harold's business qualifications, made him feel angry, too.

"Oh, yes ; the money is his," he replied dryly. "I only hope it will continue to be. As to joining forces," he added, "I shall be only too thankful to be rid of both of them. They are hindrances to the business at present, rather than helps. My advice has been disinterested, to say the least."

"I am sure you have meant it to be," she said. "But don't you think, Bill, that very often an elder brother doesn't quite realize that a younger one has grown up, and, accordingly, does not give him credit for being able to do things which he himself did at the same age? I find it hard myself to realize that Harold is not a child ; but, after all, when you were twenty, your father placed a great deal of confidence in you."

Poor Bill ! He found it hard to bear that he and Harold should be rated as equals at the same age, and by his mother, too. But there was nothing more to be said. He felt like shrugging his shoulders again, but he merely pulled at his lip and was silent.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A TWELVE-MONTH.

During the course of another year, there was no event in the lives of the Carleton family which needs to be specifically recorded. Mrs. Carleton continued hale and well, and the five children pursued the tenor of their several occupations and interests without the intervention of death or marriage, overwhelming prosperity or dire disaster. It can be said, however, that, on the whole, each member of the family was happier than he or she had been for a long time. In the first place, Bill had begun to feel at last that he was making headway in his business, which, little by little, he had reorganized on a modern basis, in spite of the injury occasioned thereby to Mr. Sanborn's feelings. Chief among the innovations had been the introduction of a brisk clerk, who, without unnecessarily wounding the old retainer's sensibilities, had virtually superseded him. From the date of Cousin Rebecca's decease, trade had prospered with Bill decidedly, and he had the satisfaction, at the end of six months, not only of telling his mother that she need feel no further concern as to the safety of her capital, but, also, of seeing his legacy of twenty-five

hundred dollars, which he had invested in two successive lumber transactions, wax fifty per cent. larger.

For three years care had kept Bill company night and day, but now his brow relaxed and he began to take an interest in other matters than business. As soon as the condition of his affairs seemed secure he solved the question of how to shelve Mr. Sanborn and yet to gladden the faithful servant's last days, by taking him into the firm and giving him a small interest in the business. Before doing so he had once or twice suggested a pension, but the old clerk had begged to be allowed to die in harness, declaring that his sole pleasure in existence was service in the firm where his life had been spent. When the offer of a partnership was made to him he vehemently refused to consider it at first, declaring his unworthiness, but the tears of happiness in his eyes betrayed his delight at the proposal, and he was finally prevailed upon to accept the honor. As Bill was shrewd enough to divine would be the case, he became a partner merely in name, exercising a general fatherly supervision over the business, but never seeking to regulate its conduct nor thwarting the projects of his former pupil—toward whom his attitude was almost worship. In clearing out the desk occupied by Harold, after that young gentleman's departure, he had happened to come across a reference to himself as "that venerable fossil," which, curiously enough, seemed to tickle his risibilities instead of offending him. He spoke of it to Bill as a capital witticism, the truth of which could not be gainsaid, and often afterward Bill could hear him chuckling over it in his seat by the fire.

"That venerable fossil. Well—well—well. Who'd

have thought it? But that's what I am, I guess ; that's what I am. Ha ! ha ! They were a pair—young Mr. Harold and young Mr. Lemuel—and right smart, too. God grant they don't come to grief in that new business of theirs!"

Whereupon, the old man would shake his head doubtfully. So many things that he had looked upon askance had been proved beneficial and wise by the new generation, that he hesitated now to trust his own judgment in almost any matter.

The aforesaid Masters Harold and Lemuel, had thus far certainly disappointed the prognostications of those who had foretold disaster from their combination. The young firm had made rapid strides in the way of acquiring a following and making money ; that is, if common rumor, which was largely based on their own roseate reports and free-handed style of living, was to be taken as a criterion. They had opened their new office just at a time when stocks were beginning to improve after a period of inactivity and depression, and had won a reputation for sagacity at once by advocating purchases which showed their customers handsome profits in a few weeks. As a consequence, Harold was nearly bursting with pride and importance. He confided to his mother that if the last six months were equal to the first their books would show a clear profit of twenty thousand dollars by commissions alone, without regard to one or two little ventures on their own account which they had made only on the strength of inside information, and which had largely swelled their capital. He continued making gifts to Constance and Violet on the slightest pretext, and he offered good-naturedly to

guarantee to double the legacies which Cousin Rebecca had left Ben and his sisters if they would place their securities in his hands. Ben was so far tempted by the proposal as to consult Bill as to what he thought of it.

"I suppose you understand how he expects to accomplish this magnificent result?" said Bill.

"I haven't the least idea, except that I am to give him my three bonds, and he promises to double them in value."

"What he will do is to buy two hundred shares of some stock that he thinks is going up, and your bonds will be a margin equal to ten per cent. or so on the cost of the two hundred shares."

"Well, isn't that all right?" queried Ben, who was not much wiser for this information.

"It is all right if the stocks go up, but if they go down, you are liable to lose your bonds and more, too."

"But he guarantees me against loss."

"That merely means if the stocks go down instead of up he will bear the loss himself instead of you."

Ben was beginning to understand.

"I guess I'd better hold on to my bonds," he said. "I'm doing pretty well with my illustration work, and there's no use in trying to get rich too fast."

"That's where your head is level, Ben," was his brother's answer.

Ben had the melancholy satisfaction of learning from Harold, a fortnight later, that if he had followed his advice he would have more than doubled his investment; but Ben was too happy in the progress he was making in the line of his first success to take his failure to do so very much to heart. The illustrations which

he had done for the magazine article sent to him had proved acceptable to the friendly editor, who had consequently given him other orders, and he had speedily become by virtue of the success of his cartoons, a regular contributor to three or four illustrated periodicals. His time, therefore, was pretty thoroughly occupied, and he was in the best of spirits. His friend, Mr. Short, said to him one day :

" You seem to have found your niche in a twinkling, Ben. There's a constantly growing market for work of your kind, and while it doesn't follow that you cannot excel in other directions, you evidently have a very happy faculty in this particular field, and I'd stick to it for the present.

" I mean to," said Ben. " By the way," he added, " there's something in my studio I wish to show you, if you have fifteen minutes to spare."

This "something," as may be surmised, was the masterpiece, the existence of which he had sedulously concealed from his mentor up to this time. It still stood with its face to the wall swathed in the cotton sheet. Said Ben, after he had placed it again on the easel, but before removing the covering :

" Be prepared for edification. Here is a sight that will—

' Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their
spheres ;
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.'

This was completed a year ago, before I found my niche," he added, as he exposed, "The Chariot Race" to view.

"Why, Ben! What is this?" exclaimed Mr. Short in amazed surprise. "Why, Ben—" he continued, but this time with the uncertainty born of a mixture of suppressed mirth and the desire to spare the feelings of the young exhibitor. Relief came from an unexpected quarter. Ben was shaking with laughter.

"What is the matter?" asked Mr. Short, not unnaturally bewildered.

"I am laughing at your expression, I don't blame you. Isn't it awful! I mean the picture—not your expression. I only wanted you to see what I was capable of 'in other directions.' Ha! ha! ha!"

As soon as Mr. Short realized the truth of the situation he was glad to be able to explode on his own account, and while he was enjoying a hearty guffaw, Ben entertained him with full details concerning the history of his masterpiece.

"I hope no one will ever place me in such a cruel situation as I placed Harrison Fay," he added, in conclusion. "You ought to be thankful I chose him as a confidant instead of you. Do you suppose you would have been equally honest?"

"Whatever the tenderness of my heart might have prompted me to say," answered Mr. Short, giving vent to another burst of merriment, "I doubt if I could have controlled my features sufficiently to have given you much encouragement. You see, my dear Ben," he added, "I am following your cue in laughing at your expense. I hope you do not mind. What are those

black spots in the corner?" he continued, indicating the marks caused by the ruthless brush. "Your sign manual?"

"Laugh away. I am bullet-proof and copper-fastened on the subject now. Those black spots?

'Look! in this place ran Cassius's dagger through;
See what a rent the envious Casca made;
Through this the well beloved Brutus stabbed.'

I was Cassius, Casca and Brutus rolled into one. I did it in the bitter throes of disenchantment, meaning to do worse. Selah!"

"And yet," remarked Mr. Short presently, when, having sobered down, he began to scrutinize the production in detail, "there are, as your friend Fay said, many good points in that picture. It doesn't follow by any means, young man, that you won't be able to paint a picture some day at which no one will be able to laugh. Rome wasn't built in an hour."

"I mean to try, you may depend upon it," answered Ben. "But I shall begin with something less ambitious than a Roman chariot race."

It was just about the close of the year referred to at the beginning of this chapter, and in October of the calendar year, that Mrs. Carleton said one day at the dinner-table:

"What should you think if Constance and I were to spend the winter abroad with Mr. and Mrs. Short?"

Her remark was addressed to the assembled family, but she naturally looked at Bill as the eldest, and the one who held the purse-strings.

"Mrs. Short invited Constance, yesterday," she continued, before any one had time to answer. "She thinks the change will do her good, to say nothing of the pleasure and advantage in an educational way, of a trip to Europe. We got talking about it afterward, and finally I was persuaded into saying that I would take into consideration both letting Constance go and going myself into the bargain. Mrs. Short seemed very eager to have us both go, and, as I have never crossed the Atlantic, it seems to me that it might be sensible to avail myself of so favorable an opportunity. In a year or two from now, I shall be too old to go."

This statement of the case brought forth a general chorus of approval. They must go, by all means; what was there to prevent? They would have a glorious, gorgeous time.

"Whereabouts do you intend to travel?" asked Ben, eagerly.

"In Italy, principally," replied Constance.

"Then you will see Rome and Florence," he cried, with melodramatic rapture. "How I envy you, Con!"

"But you don't intend to allow the Shorts to pay your expenses?" inquired Bill, with a wrinkling brow.

"No, my son, not mine, of course. They have invited Constance, but I go only on the understanding that I pay my own. It is of that I wish to speak. Can I afford it?"

"I'll pay for you both, myself," exclaimed Harold, with a grandiloquent air, that caused Bill to smile sardonically. "I'll draw you a check for three thousand to-morrow, and, if you need more, you shall have it."

"Mother has more than ample means of her own," said Bill, with dignity.

"Bless you, my boy, all the same," said Mrs. Carleton, to her darling. "Then it will not pinch you, Bill?"

"Pinch me? You will be able to go, and lay up money. But even if it would pinch us, we should insist on your going."

"If there's any pinching to be done, I demand to contribute my share," said Ben. "I can't draw a check for three thousand at one fell swoop like Harold, but I can draw a sketch or two."

"I have nearly three hundred dollars in the bank which I have earned as a nurse," said Violet, "and I can earn more."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Bill, irritated by the supposition that any such drain upon the family resources was necessary. "Mother does not need assistance from any of us, I tell you. Besides, it will cost very little more for her to travel abroad than if she lived at home, especially as we are now all able to take care of ourselves, and can, therefore, pay the household bills while she is gone, if we choose, out of our own pockets."

"Hurrah! We do choose; we'll do that, then!" cried Ben, jumping eagerly at this concession to the general desire to be of pecuniary assistance.

"But I wish to add," Bill went on, with a certain haughtiness, "that if mother does need anything at any time, I am in a position to see that she has it."

"One would suppose from the way Bill talks," said Harold, "that none of the rest of us had the right to do

anything for her. Ample means or not, I intend to draw that check to-morrow!"

"You are all as good and generous as can be," interrupted Mrs. Carleton, "and I know you would each of you let me have your last dollar if I needed it; but you hear what Bill says: that I have income enough and to spare for a trip abroad. As to Constance, since Mr. and Mrs. Short have asked to be allowed to pay her expenses and can well afford to do so, I see no objection, on the whole, to our permitting it. They are old friends, and might, I think, reasonably feel hurt if we stood on our pride in the matter and insisted that she pay for herself."

This view of the subject met with some opposition, particularly from Harold, who announced that he did not believe in being beholden to anybody. They were not paupers, he said, and could pay their own way, and he did not like the idea that a sister of his should be scooting over Europe at some one else's expense, when she might get all the money she wished at home. But finally Mrs. Carleton's argument that there was such a thing as false pride, and that the generous offers of true friends deserved to be accepted, prevailed with the rest of the family, and before the 1st of November, the travelers were on the ocean, expecting to be away until the following June.



CHAPTER XXXII.

RENEWING OLD TIMES.

It had been arranged that Violet should give up her duties as nurse during their absence and keep house for her brothers. This plan was very agreeable to Violet, for she felt rather the need of rest. She had been hard at work now for the better part of three years, first at the hospital, where she had learned the care of the sick, and later as a trained nurse for hire. In this experience she had not only necessarily seen much of the suffering and sadness which is the portion of humanity ; but she had been brought in contact with able and thoughtful men of the medical profession, whose untiring skill and devotion to their calling, and whose intelligent views of life had absorbed and fascinated her. Her labor had been veritably a labor of love, so thoroughly had she become imbued with interest in her chosen duties, and in the stress of occupation there had been little time to think of herself. If there was any reason to think that her wound had not healed, it was merely because she had turned a deaf ear to the admiration which her beauty had attracted, both among the physicians whose orders she obeyed and the invalids whom she attended.

A middle-aged doctor, with a lucrative practice, had intimated to her that she might become his second wife ; a young house-surgeon, with high hopes of preferment, had made her the offer of his hand and heart ; and she was conscious that she could have married one, at least, of her patients, had she been disposed to give him the least encouragement. But, though she was in some measure touched by the affection which she thus involuntarily awakened, she felt not the least desire to alter her condition, not the least thrill of reciprocating attachment.

And yet she was glad now of the excuse for rest afforded her ; and, rather to her own surprise, she found her spirits rising in the performance of her simple domestic duties. Especially did she take delight in the resumption of intimacy with her brothers and intercourse with the outer world, which her busy life had almost completely interrupted. It was pleasant to her to realize that it no longer irked her to meet and converse with intelligent people, and that there were so many matters which interested her, and which she was eager to discuss.

All this did not really dawn upon her until after she had been at home several weeks, and she had been passing two or three evenings out of every seven in the society of the broad-shouldered young man, with the full brown beard, whom she had almost accosted on the landing, in mistake for one of her brothers, some twelve months before. He was, in truth, almost the only intelligent person of the outer world with whom she met and conversed ; but it is easy enough to generalize from the particular, without being altogether

conscious of the fallacy therein involved, which is, after all, only partially a fallacy. Certainly, Harrison Fay was capable of representing very creditably to a woman the intelligent outer world ; and when a young man is equal to such responsibility, why is he not preferable to half a dozen ?

Without dwelling upon this particular point further, suffice it to say that the friendship between Ben and the young electrical engineer seemed to have acquired a fresh impetus with the return of the second Miss Carleton under the parental roof. He was perpetually dropping in to see Ben on one pretext or other, and usually in the evening, when a certain young lady was likely to be in the drawing-room. Harrison was as fond as ever of discussing all sorts of subjects with his old crony, and the presence of this third spirit acted as a stimulus upon his rhetorical and argumentative powers to a degree that was wonderful to himself. He was amazed at his own eloquence in expressing his views concerning the various problems connected with the philosophy of living which they debated.

These evening discussions grew to be a regular institution. Violet, who had read but little compared with either of the two others, was more inclined at first to listen than to talk, but she soon realized that one can form opinions without great familiarity with books, and that she had already reached convictions of her own on many matters by virtue of her active practical experience. It will be remembered that in their student days Ben had been a ferocious idealist, and Harrison an uncompromising materialist, but now, curiously enough, though they were much nearer together in opinions

than formerly, they had to a certain extent exchanged beliefs.

That is to say, Ben was a little more willing to take into consideration the bread-and-butter side of an argument, and thus correlatively more inclined to apply an interrogation mark, so to speak, to propositions of which the component parts were misty. On the other hand, Harrison had derived from deeper study into the mysteries of science a love of truth for its own sake which spurred him into excursions that savored of star-dust and world-tides, and prophesied glorious possibilities for untrammeled and enlightened human nature. Strangely enough, too, this attitude of ardent optimism seemed to become the more pronounced the more Harrison saw of Violet, and that in spite of the fact that she was in a certain sense the least of an idealist of the three, and was ever disposed to cast her vote in favor of more practical, matter-of-fact views. And yet Violet could not help being interested by the glowing word-pictures which this broad-shouldered, manly-looking student of earth's mysteries drew as to what life meant and what it ought to be. She would sit drinking in what he had to say, fascinated in spite of herself, and all the more ready to listen with patience because Ben had told her that in the work of his profession Harrison was cool, practical and tenacious of his end. Not only she was fascinated, but Ben also, and often the sometime rampant idealist would, out of the sheer desire to hear his antagonist talk, pursue the opposite argument far beyond the limits of his own belief. Oftener still, however, when the conversation had been brought to an end

by the cruel progress of hours and minutes, Ben would exclaim, by way of summing up the situation :

" After all, old fellow, we differ only to agree. We have practically the same ideas, and we both know it."

Then, with a nod of acquiescence to his friend, the enthusiast, come down to earth again, would take his leave of Violet shyly and respectfully, adding, perhaps, a word of apology to convey the hope that he had not bored her by his eloquence.

Occasionally, too, Bill would take a part in these evening discussions, though the part of an auditor rather than of an active participant. Topics relating to literature, philosophy, science and art were out of his domain ; and if he happened to be at home, he would sit in a corner of the sofa listening, with a smile on his lips that was a little superior. Once in a while when the subject changed to be one regarding which every-day knowledge was of service, he would express an opinion in clear, common sense terms that seemed to leave little room for further argument. Considering, therefore, his apparently condescending attitude, Violet was much astonished to hear him remark one day, when she and he happened to be passing the evening together, and he was sitting ruminating with a cigar :

" I wish very much that I had been obliged to go to college."

" Do you ?" she replied, not knowing in her surprise exactly what to say.

" Yes. Father gave me the choice of going to college or going into business, and, not knowing any better, I chose business, though mother tried her best to persuade me not to. Well," he added, with a sigh, " what's

done is done, and there's no use in crying over spilt milk, but if I ever have sons, I shall know what not to do."

"But you've done very well, Bill. If you hadn't been a good business man, we should have had no one to fall back on when father died."

"I'm a good business man, Violet; but what else am I? If I had gone to college, I might have been a good business man and something beside. When I hear you and Ben and Harrison Fay talking away like steam-engines about books and subjects which are the same as Greek to me, I realize my mistake more keenly than ever, and I began to realize it some time ago."

"Well, of course, I can't deny that I believe a college education is a great advantage to most boys, but as a little girl I can remember how anxious you were not to go, and how eager you were to go into business. Very likely, if you had been forced to go against your will, you would have misspent your time and got into mischief. As it is, you have managed the business splendidly, so that our finances are beginning to look up again, and mother is likely to be able to live in comfort and without anxiety for the rest of her days. I think you have plenty to be proud of, Bill."

This was somewhat consoling, but nevertheless Bill shook his head disconsolately. Not that the consciousness of his deficiencies interfered seriously with his happiness; but it operated, in spite of his own desire to esteem himself highly, as a limitation to his self-esteem. In growing wiser, his eyes had been opened to his own lack of education.

Bill was beginning to grow a little portly. Prosperity and the absence of worry had been quick to manifest

themselves in increased avoirdupois and renewed attention to his personal appearance. He showed signs of an inclination to cultivate society again. Very soon after his mother's departure he invested in a saddle-horse, which he found leisure to ride, and which he drove also in a neat, quiet-looking cart ; a very modest equipage compared with the dashing wagonette and pair with which Harold was edifying the community. The last named young gentleman was spending money like smoke, and yet, according to his own account, laying up a handsome sum every quarter. He already had, beside this pair, a hunter and a hack for every-day use ; was building a sloop yacht with the hope of electrifying the nautical world ; was a prominent club-man and had lately begun to devote himself to the gentler sex in spite of the sneers of Charley Daggett and his crew, who were of the stalwart opinion that society was a bore and were fain to keep Harold to themselves.

But here again he shocked the sensibilities of his brothers and sisters by selecting as the objects of his attentions the most noisy and most conspicuous among the young women in society. These he showered with roses, and drove out in his wagonette successively, causing a gentle flutter in their respective bosoms, and excruciating fears in the bosom of his family as to whether he might not any day make an endowment of himself and all his worldly goods.

"I say, Harold," said Ben, one day, in the midst of the domestic circle ; "I protest, as the artist of the family, against the concatenation of color on your coach this afternoon. I don't pretend to be a society man, or a competent critic of the charms of lovely woman, but,

really, I do trust that you don't intend to thrust a sister-in-law upon us who confounds her greens and her pinks and her yellows so hopelessly."

Bill gave vent to a chuckle of delight by way of approval, and exchanged a sympathetic glance with Violet.

"Who was it?" she asked, merry in her turn.

"Give it up," said Ben.

"Miss Daisy Chandler," said Bill, by way of explanation.

"Oh, yes," answered Violet, with one of her old-time giggles.

Harold, who had perceived the exchange of glances, drew himself up haughtily, half tempted to be angry; then, obviously struck by an idea, he exclaimed:

"That's all right, Ben! You needn't feel any concern about me. I drive one to-day and another to-morrow. But if you are apprehensive on the score of matrimony, there's one member of this family will bear watching, I can tell you."

"Who's that?"

"He sits directly opposite. I refer to our respected eldest brother. I am ready to take my solemn oath that I've met him driving out the same young lady three times in the last week, and I saw them walking on Sunday, to boot."

"How's that, Bill?" asked Violet.

"A very old story," he answered, looking confused in spite of his effort to appear at ease, but evidently not altogether displeased.

"It may be old, but it will bear watching, all the same."

"I suppose it is only fair that we should know her name," Ben suggested.

"Certainly," interjected Bill. "It was Miss Ethel Davis, if you wish to know."

"The same," said Harold, with a triumphant smile. "Well, why wouldn't it be a good thing all around?" he added, jocularly. "They are neither of them chickens, and each might go a good deal further and fare worse."

No one was prepared to dispute the soundness of this assertion, and Bill himself merely smiled enigmatically. It was certainly true that he and Ethel had been seeing a good deal of each other of late. Though no chicken, as Harold had said, Ethel was no less handsome than formerly. She had received much attention and admiration in society and several offers of marriage, but somehow she still remained single at an age when the whirl of social life had begun to pall a little. She had been abroad once or twice, and to Florida and to California, and spent summers at Lenox and Bar Harbor and Newport, and the right man had not come along. People who knew her best expressed the opinion that she never would marry, and her mother was beginning to be decidedly anxious on that score. She had lately taken to photographing as a new form of diversion, and had become an enthusiastic horsewoman. She must at least always keep herself occupied, and whatever she did, she liked to do with all her heart, therein greatly differing from her brother Randolph, for whose indolence she was prone to express hearty contempt. From the time of his marriage, Randolph had gradually degenerated into a luxurious, cane-sucking club-man, who it was next to impossible to arouse to enthusiasm on and

subject, unless it were a good dinner or the charms of some other man's wife. He had grown corpulent, which sadly interfered with his good looks and powers of fascination. He and his wife appeared at balls and dinner-parties together, but at other times seemed to prefer the society of somebody else. They were extremely fashionable, however, though it would be difficult to say exactly why.

The reappearance of Bill in the gay world after the lapse of several seasons, had been an agreeable surprise to Ethel. It had seemed more or less like the return in the real flesh of one supposed to be dead forever. She had always liked him very well, and she found him now greatly improved; no longer an awkward stripling, but a dignified man. He, in his turn, conscious that the wound which she had inflicted had healed and left no scar, was glad to take up their friendship on the old terms.

"What have you been doing all these years?" she had inquired the first time they met, hoping, perhaps, that he would intimate that he had been wearing the willow for her. But his reply had revealed clearly that she had been but little in his thoughts, to say the least, and it was undoubtedly the best thing for Bill that this was made apparent. They had renewed their acquaintance on a purely Platonic basis on either side, and their friendship had become surprisingly interesting to each of them. Ethel doubtless detected herself thinking that, if she were ever going to marry, she would be safe in accepting a man so presentable and worthy, whom she at the same time respected and liked heartily, even if she were not desperately enamored of

him ; and it may be that Bill, in letting his rekindled passion have full sway, reflected that a marriage with the daughter of Leroy Davis would be of great advantage to him both socially and financially. Certainly, at the time Harold divulged the affair, he had made up his mind to win her if he could.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

TWO OF A KIND.

The disclosure concerning Ethel took place toward the end of December. On Christmas Eve, a few days later, the Carletons were assembled in the drawing-room, making preparations for Christmas, and regretting the absence of their mother and their sister, when the door-bell rang, and a moment after a visitor entered. He was a brisk, wiry-looking young man, with a healthy glow on his cheeks, and keen, sparkling eyes, which, even as he stood for an instant on the threshold, glanced eagerly around the room, as though in search of something or some one, to the exclusion of everything and everybody else.

"By Jove ! it's Percy !" exclaimed Ben, springing forward with delight. "How are you, old fellow ? This is a Christmas present, indeed."

Percy it certainly was, and very much the same Percy in appearance ; scarcely a day older-looking, so they all said, except for his large mustache and that he had a more serious expression, with a few lines on his forehead, which indicated that he had become familiar

with care and hard work since last they met. He looked stronger, too, and less of an exquisite in his attire, though he was well and stylishly dressed.

His reception was thoroughly hearty. He was plied with questions, and, before he knew it, was telling them, in his old chatty, vivacious way, all about the wonderful West. He declared that he was in love with the West, and never wished to return home, except for a visit.

Home? No; the West was his home. He had come this time for a fortnight's holiday, the only vacation he had taken since he went out there.

At this point, his gaze, which had been wandering furtively around the room, centered itself on Violet, and he said :

“Your mother and sister are quite well, I hope?”

“They're very well; but they're in Europe, you know.”

“In Europe?” he exclaimed, in a tone of such undisguised disappointment that a smile compressed the lips both of Ben and Violet. “No; I did not know.”

“Yes; they sailed two months ago, to be gone until the early summer,” Violet continued. “Needless to say, they will be very sorry to have missed you.”

This was evidently a sockdolager for Percy. But there was nothing for him to do, save to accept the situation and make the best of it, which resulted in his entertaining them all for an hour with tales of his experiences in the far West. When, however, he got up to go, he persuaded Ben to stroll back with him to his father's house, where he was staying, and have a

smoke. For a moment, he walked along in silence; then he said :

"I suppose you know why I've come East?"

"I can guess, I think."

"Well, tell me, old fellow: Have I any chance? Does she care for me? Is there any other man in the running? Let me know the whole truth just as it is. I came on purpose to see her, and I find that she's abroad."

"There is no other man, Percy, at least so far as I know."

"Thank God for that!"

"As to the rest, I don't know what to say. She likes you, I know, but as to how much she likes you—why don't you write to her and find out?"

Percy reflected a moment.

"I will," he said. "I'll write to-night to know my fate and—and I'll ask her to cable her answer."

Ben laughed outright. "That's Western enterprise with a vengeance."

"Why not? When a man is dead in love with a woman, he is in need of a prompt answer, if he ever is."

"I suppose so. Unfortunately or fortunately, I was never in that predicament."

The letter was written and posted that night. For the next week Percy's attention was principally occupied in making computations as to when it would probably be received. His lady-love was somewhere in Italy. After crossing the ocean and passing into the hands of her bankers in London, it would have to be forwarded and run the risk of delay, to say nothing of

non-delivery. Then, too, the steamer might break her screw or run into an iceberg and the missive be retarded or swallowed up in the Atlantic.

All these tormenting doubts were so rife in Percy's mind that after the first evening it was difficult for Ben, who saw him constantly, to induce him to talk about anything else. But he managed to learn that Percy's affairs were sufficiently prosperous for him to be able to support a wife, and that his future in the railroad field looked very bright. Moreover, many of the investments in which his father's money had been sunk had improved greatly in value, and his father was likely to be a rich man again.

The days passed, and Percy was beginning to be very downcast. In vain Ben represented that Italy was a long way off. He shook his head and declared that either the letter had miscarried or she had preferred to write her refusal.

"I don't see why she could not have put me out of my misery at once," he added, "though I don't know what will become of me if she does refuse me."

"Cheer up, old man, and give her time."

Twelve days had gone by. Percy's leave of absence was nearly at an end. He must start for the West the day after to-morrow.

Again and again he had visited the Atlantic-cable office to make sure that no message for him had been mislaid by mistake and to see that they had his correct address; but the agent gave him no satisfaction. He walked the streets with Ben, a melancholy being, never willing to be out of doors long for fear it might arrive

in the meantime. Even Ben was beginning to think that the letter could not have reached Constance.

"I feel," said Percy, on the thirteenth morning, while they were out walking, "very much like King *Ægeus* when he was watching the horizon for a glimpse of the white sails of his son Theseus who had gone to kill the Minotaur. It means life or death to me."

"Poor old Percy!" said Ben, sympathetically, struck by the earnestness of his friend's voice.

"Thanks, old fellow. I shall try to be a man, though, whatever happens."

They went up the steps of Mr. White's house, and Percy, unlocking the door, stepped into the hall. As was his wont, he looked at the table where letters were left, and springing forward, held up a brown envelope, the character of which was unmistakable.

"It has come!" he cried. Instinctively he stepped into the side room that opened into the hall. Ben waited outside. For a moment there was a dead stillness, then Percy, with his eyes full of tears, stepped out, and with an ecstatic: "Oh, Ben, Ben, read this!" he threw his arms around his friend's neck and hugged him.

"I say, I say; how am I to read it if you go on like that, playing the polar bear act on me?" cried Ben; and, having freed himself at last, he held the telegram to the light. It was very short and concise, leaving no room for uncertainty:

"Yes.

CONSTANCE."

"Hurrah!" cried Ben, waving it above his head. "Brother-in-law, how are you?"

It was a day of great excitement in the Carleton household. The evening was passed in concocting a cablegram of congratulation. Violet and Ben put together their wits and produced the following, which they adjudged to be inexpensive, tender and discerning, all at the same time :

“ To Miss CONSTANCE CARLETON,

“ Venice :

“ Delighted but not surprised.

“ THE CARLETONS.”

Percy remonstrated laughingly, and declared that it was outrageous and should not be sent.

“ And why, pray ?” asked Violet. “ She is not yours yet, Mr. Lover from the wild and woolly West. When you are married it will be time to dictate to her family.”

Bill, after hearing the news, had pleaded an engagement for the evening and slipped out. It was eleven o’clock when he returned. Violet, Ben, Harold and Percy were still confabulating in the drawing-room. As he entered, looking immaculate in evening dress, he wore a slight air of confusion, which prompted Ben to exclaim :

“ And where have you been, Mr. Man? Your engagement must have been a very particular one to have caused you to desert your family at such a time. Come, give an account of yourself.”

Bill smiled in a shame-faced fashion, and his air of confusion increased. He seemed to hesitate a moment ; then he said, mysteriously :

“ Can you stand two shocks in one day, good people ?”

"Oh, Bill ! Bill ! You don't mean to tell you're engaged ?" cried Violet, with sudden inspiration.

"Bill engaged ?" echoed Ben. "Is it true ? By Jove ! see him color. You've hit it, Violet, I do believe."

"Yes ; I'm engaged," Bill answered, with a sort of hang-dog delight.

"To Miss Davis, of course ?" cried Harold.

Bill nodded.

"She accepted me yesterday, and—and I should have told you all this morning ; but she—Ethel wished to tell her father and mother first."

Here was another piece of exciting intelligence, indeed, Percy and Bill shook hands like madmen over their common happiness, while the others presently devoted themselves to concocting a second cablegram to inform their mother of the news.

For the next few months, there was agitated correspondence between those abroad and those at home. After the ecstasies of congratulation were over, the various feminine minds concerned began to grapple with the necessary matrimonial arrangements. Percy wished to be married as soon as possible. He wrote that he had hired an attractive little house, which he was furnishing to the best of his ability, but that he sorely needed female judgment as to carpets and wall-papers. But even this pathetic argument failed to bring his bride to be home sooner than the date which she had stipulated in her second letter to him, the 15th of May, a month earlier than had been her expectation when she went abroad. For, as she forcibly represented, how could she come home any earlier ? What woman who happened to be in Paris at such a time would neglect

the opportunity of providing herself with a wedding outfit? And not only had she her own to look after, but dear Ethel's also. Much as she was longing to see her dearest Percy, he must wait patiently until the 15th of May. To finish a day before that would be simply out of the question.

Of course, Violet and Ethel rushed into each other's arms, so to speak, and became the fastest friends again. Ethel, to say nothing of Mrs. Davis, was all in a flutter over the thousand and one preparations which had to be thought of. As has been intimated, the all important question of the trousseau was solved by sending a list and full instructions to Constance, one of the secret and underlined instructions being that on no account was Mrs. Short to be allowed to choose any of the things.

"She is the best of women, I know, my dear," wrote Ethel, "but I'm sure that even you will not maintain that she dresses well."

This matter having been set at rest, there still remained more to be done than seemed possible to Mrs. Davis in the short time allowed. The happy pairs were to be married on the same day, the 3d of June. Though Constance was theoretically averse to an ostentatious wedding, she found herself combated by the wishes of the Davis family, who, as Mr. Davis, the father, oracularly expressed it, wished Ethel to be married in a church in the presence of her friends, in a Christian manner. Constance was at first in favor of being married at home in her traveling-dress; but having found that her mother was rather of Mr. Davis's

opinion, and that Percy had no opinion at all on the subject except that he wished to be married as soon as could be, she resigned herself to the pomp, importance and perplexities of a fashionable ceremony, which was not without its glamour even for her.

As is customary when young people are on the brink of matrimony, presents from relations and friends began to pour in. One of the first of these was a check from Harold of one thousand dollars apiece to each of the brides, to expend as they might see fit.

"You may like to buy some little thing or other for your house after you're married," he said in an off-hand way to Ethel, as though he regarded his gift as a mere bagatelle.

Bill, when he heard of this munificence, was decidedly annoyed and wished to return at least a part of the money; but he realized that he should offend Harold seriously by offering to do so. He was further irritated by learning from Randolph Davis that some wag at the club had advised that the checks in question be promptly cashed.

It was May at last. The latest letters from Paris had reported that the finishing touches were being given to the bridal apparel, and that the travelers would be ready to sail on the day appointed. Percy wrote from the West that owing to the press of business on his railroad he could arrive only the night before the ceremony, and so would be unable to greet Constance and her mother on their arrival. This was depressing news for Constance, who had hoped that he would be able to meet her and pass in her society the few days that would intervene between the date of her landing and

their wedding-day ; but the array of presents which she found awaiting her made her lover's absence seem less unbearable. Up to within three days before the wedding, Constance had received one hundred and eighteen presents and Ethel one hundred and thirty-five, including a handsome silver service apiece, and costly pictures, glass, books, articles of furniture and household ornaments. Sophia, who had contributed her own mite in the shape of a dozen table-napkins embroidered by her own hand, took Ben apart on the day after his sister's arrival and said :

"Master Ben, why don't you give her that fine picture of yours upstairs ?"

"Which one ?" he asked, not understanding what she had in mind. Then, before she could reply, he exclaimed, with an outburst of laughter : "You don't mean 'The Chariot Race,' surely, Sophia ?"

"Yes, sir. It would please her," she replied, benignly. "It's a beautiful picture, Master Ben."

Ben found considerable difficulty in persuading Sophia that her young lady could possibly prefer a gift of another kind.

It was amusing to observe how jealous the old nurse was in Constance's behalf, even to the disparagement of the other bride, whose lead in the number of presents received was a cause of numerous head-shakings and mumblings on the part of that excellent woman.

"She's nice, folks say," she confided to Ben, "and she was always fine-looking in spite of her proud ways ; but when it comes to putting her alongside my young lady, it's no less than plotting and conspiring, say I."



CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WATERLOO OF FINANCE.

Late on the afternoon of that third day before the wedding, Bill came into the house with so grave and disturbed an expression that his mother and Violet and Ben, who were in the room, exclaimed, simultaneously :

"Why, what's the matter, Bill? Has anything happened?"

"Yes," he answered, shortly; "a great deal has happened. Harold has failed."

"Failed! How awful!" ejaculated Violet, while the others stared at him aghast.

"What do you mean, my son?" Mrs. Carleton added, with a look of bewildered pain.

"His firm has suspended payment. It cannot meet its obligations, and has had to go to the wall. There are one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars in good money, to say nothing of anything they had made in the last two years, gone to the dogs."

"But I thought a broker couldn't fail. That was what they always said," exclaimed Violet.

Bill smiled contemptuously.

"A broker who speculates can fail rather worse than any one else. I knew it was only a question of time when he did fail, but I hoped that at least it would not happen until after the wedding."

"But where is Harold? Have you seen him?" inquired Mrs. Carleton, eager to know the details, but overawed by Bill's repellent mien.

"I have just left him. We have been together all day."

"Will it—er—be publicly announced?"

"It will be known; it is known that the firm is in difficulties; but," he added, with the same close-mouthed manner, "the worst is over, so far as the public is concerned."

"You are talking in riddles, Bill," exclaimed Ben. "Don't you see how anxious mother is to know all there is to know?"

Bill scowled a moment, then he said:

"There is very little more to know. Harold came to me last night, and told me how the matter stood. If he had confided in me earlier, I might have been able to stave it off, or, at least, prevented any publicity. He and Lemuel and I and some of the bank people have been together all day. The long and the short of it is that the debts of the firm have been taken care of, and their business is to be wound up."

"Then there will be no scandal, after all. Thank Heaven for that," said the mother. "Poor Harold!"

"'Poor Harold,' indeed! But what can you expect when two headstrong youths fancy they can accumulate fortunes in two years? They may thank their lucky stars it was no worse. If, instead of applying to me,

they had gone in deeper, they could not have escaped public disgrace."

"How bad was it?" asked Violet.

"You mean their indebtedness? They owed at least thirty thousand dollars they couldn't pay."

"And who paid it?" said Ben.

"As long as it was paid, no matter who paid it."

"I can see. It was you paid it, Bill," said Violet.

"Well, since you insist upon knowing, I paid half and Mr. Hazard half. I paid part of my share in cash, and gave a note for the rest."

"That was noble of you, my son."

"It was necessary, mother; that is all. I couldn't see the family disgraced while I had the means to prevent it."

"But we all ought to be allowed to help," cried Violet.

"We will share the loss all round."

"Of course we will," said Ben.

But Bill would not hear of such a proposition. The matter was adjusted and settled, he said; he was the business man of the family, and the only one able to afford the loss. The bank would give him all the time he needed on his note, and Harold would like enough be able to repay him some day. He declared his willingness, moreover, to take Harold into his office again, provided he were prepared to buckle down soberly to business. This last offer he made that evening when the matter of the fiasco had been thoroughly discussed, and all were considering what was to become of Harold. He, poor fellow, had slunk into the house, and, after receiving a tender embrace from his mother, had shut himself up in his room.

"I know what would be the best thing for him," said Constance, suddenly. "He shall come out West with us, and Percy will find him a position on his railroad."

"Ah, but I could not bear to lose him!" exclaimed Mrs. Carleton. "Away from the influence of home in that terrible West, he would be sure to go wrong."

"That's absurd, mother," said Bill. "It would be the best thing in the world for him to be able to cut loose from his old surroundings and start fresh in a place where he isn't known. But it remains to be seen what Percy may have to say; positions on railroads are not to be had merely for the asking."

"They are for my asking," answered Constance. "Don't feel anxious on that score, Brother William."

The accuracy of this statement was demonstrated within forty-eight hours. Before the bridegroom from the West was granted a private interview by his lady-love he had promised to find a place for Harold without delay. Give him a chance? Of course he would give him a chance. Where would he himself be if he had not been given a chance at the same age?

"Out West you shall go, Harold, if you only say the word," he added, "and I guarantee you a position."

"I will go, Percy," said Harold, humbly; "I should much prefer it to remaining here."

"And now, my dear relations-in-law, since that matter is settled, suppose you give me a little breathing spell alone with the lady of my soul."

"How greedy you are!" said Violet. "After to-morrow she will be yours forever, and yet you begrudge us these last few hours."

Nevertheless, she set an example to the others by

taking her departure from the room with promptitude. A few moments later, Percy had taken from his pocket a jeweler's box, the spring of which he touched, and there was disclosed a sparkling sapphire ring.

"Oh, Percy, is this for me?"

"Such as it is; but it is not worthy of you. Yet nothing could be, Constance. I did not send it to you, because I wished to put it on your hand myself. To think," he added, as he took her fingers in his and slipped the ring into its proper place, "that I have you, after all. There was a time when I feared that you might never care for me."

Constance returned his ardent gaze with a shy, happy look. Then she drew with her unoccupied hand a letter from her bosom and said :

"Do you remember this, Percy?"

He opened it expectantly. "My valentine! I should think I did! And you have kept it all these years.

"Maid with the dark-brown eyes
And angel-like expression,
You do not heed my sighs,
But list to my confession :
I know of no one half so sweet
Who walks beneath the sky,
And I will be your valentine
Forever and for aye.'

"Say, sweet one, will you be mine?"

"I have told you I would already," she answered, burying her head on his shoulder. "And, Percy, I think I must have loved you a little all the time without knowing it."



CHAPTER XXXV.

HAPPINESS GALORE.

The morning fixed for the wedding was as bright and lovely as such days ought to be. The double ceremony was to take place at twelve o'clock, and, needless to say, everybody was so absorbed with his or her individual preparations, that no one had much time to consider what any one else was doing in the interim. Bill was in a feverish condition, and haunted by the idea that he should not be able to find the wedding-ring in his pocket at the critical moment. There was great bustle in the Carleton household, especially in the vicinity of Constance's chamber, where her mother and Sophia, who was almost incoherent with excitement, were decking her in her bridal attire. The various male personages interested in the affair had stipulated that there should be no delay at the church, and all the women of the household were so imbued with the conviction that the bride would not be ready in time, that they were constantly getting in one another's way and making all sorts of minute-consuming blunders. All? That is, except Violet, for the good reason that Violet had not

been seen since breakfast. No one had missed her in the general confusion ; but now she was asked for, no one could remember having laid eyes on her. Where could she be ?

"I rather think she will be able to give a good account of herself," said Mrs. Carleton, with a slightly knowing air, when Bill, who was already beginning to fuss as to the absolute necessity of punctuality, asked what had become of her.

"Well, in an hour from now we ought to be at the church," he said, looking at his watch. "That will give her very little time to dress."

Five minutes later, a carriage drove up to the house and stopped. From it Violet and Harrison Fay alighted and tripped up the steps.

"Where have you two been ?" asked Bill, who opened the door and surveyed them in astonishment.

The pair exchanged a merry and somewhat abashed glance ; then Violet said, boldly :

"We have just been out to get married, my dear brother. Behold the proof of it," and she held up archly the third finger of her left hand, whereon glistened a plain gold ring similar to the one in Bill's pocket.

"Married ! You two—married ?" cried Bill, aghast.

"Why not ? Did you think that you and Constance had an exclusive right to the institution ?"

"What will mother say ?" Bill managed to stammer.

"Mother knows all about it. She is the only one in the secret. We have been engaged three weeks. Everybody was so occupied with the two certain weddings

that they left Harrison and me out of the account and to ourselves, which suited us exactly, didn't it, dear?"

"It certainly did," answered the radiant apostle of electricity.

"And when we came to think it over," continued Violet, "we both of us preferred to be married without fuss and feathers, especially as there were two other weddings so imminent in the family, and so we dispensed with everything usually considered indispensable to bride and groom, including wedding-cake, and we went out after breakfast, and were made man and wife. Harrison has hired a dear little house in the suburbs, to which we intend to wend our way later in the day, by way of a wedding journey. And now we are ready to eat a piece of your wedding-cake, if you will allow us some, Bill ; and we humbly beg your pardon for having got married without your leave. Down on your knees, Harrison ; the first was much harder, you know. Your blessing, brother."

"Well, what will happen next, I wonder ?" exclaimed the overwhelmed William. "Bless you, my children ! Bless you ! Bless you !"

"To think," said Ben, when he heard the news, a few minutes later, "that it has been going on under my eyes for six months, and I was idiot enough never to dream of such a thing. I supposed that you two were interested in discussion solely for discussion's sake."

* * * * *

And so they were married. And here at the altar we must leave the Carletons. As to their future, there is

little to be said, because their future is still before them. Yet the following letter, received a few weeks ago by Mrs. Carleton from Constance, written about two years and a half after her marriage, will interest those who may wish to follow their fortunes further :

“ MY DEAR MOTHER : At last I am able to answer in my own handwriting your budget of home news, which has filled my soul with happiness, though I had my share of happiness already. I wish you could see the new baby. He is sweet, and a great deal prettier than his sister at the same age, and you remember she was not homely. I have decided to call him Percy, of course, though his father says it will breed confusion, later on, to have two Percys in the house. If Violet had not christened her baby after dear father, I might, possibly, have named him John, though I think it only natural for the eldest son to bear his father’s name. Don’t you? I miss you, dear mother. It was such a relief to have you with me when Mary was born ; but it would have been selfish to ask you to make the long journey again. I send you a kiss, and so does Baby Percy.

“ And so dear old Highlands has been pulled down and the place cut up into building lots ! Since it will add to our income, I suppose we ought not to complain ; but what good times we children did have there when we were little ! I am happier now, though, dear mother, than I ever was. Life seems more to me every day. Percy is so good to me.

“ I am glad to hear that Harrison has been made a professor of electrical science, and that his invention in connection with electricity promises to be so successful.

Percy says there should be 'millions in it,' and he wishes to take some of the stock. Give Violet my love and thank her for the baby's blanket. I wish I could see her boy and she my two babies. Children are such a blessing that I do hope Ethel and Bill will not be long without one. You say they are well and that Bill is making money. I am glad of that. Their new house must be lovely, from your description.

"I am excited beyond measure by what you write me regarding Ben's attentions to Miss M. Are you sure she is good enough for him? I should like to see the dear old fellow happily settled down. He was meant for a domestic man, but somehow he has always avoided falling in love like the rest of us. It is rather a pity, as you say, that she has so little money; but Ben will not think of that if he loves her, especially as he seems to be doing so well in his profession. I wish he could somehow make a little money, for no one would enjoy spending it more than Ben. His work grows better and better; people out here speak of it constantly, and you know a man has to be a pretty good artist or the West hasn't time to notice him.

"And now I will let you into a little secret, in my turn, which concerns Harold. He is desperately devoted to a Miss Gammon, only daughter of the largest soap manufacturer in this part of the country. Very likely you have seen the advertisement "Gammon's Soap" in the fly-leaves of some of the periodicals to which Ben contributes. Well, the Gammons are rather on the border line of society—we do draw the line, after a fashion, even here—and her father is a coarse, illiterate individual, but a very shrewd business man, Percy says,

and worth at least three million dollars. The daughter, whose name is Gabrielle—fancy Gabrielle Gammon!—is very bright and rather slangy, and you, dear mother, would call her a little fast. But that is chiefly her manner; and, after all, as Percy says, you can't expect all the cardinal virtues with three millions. We shall see what we shall see. It seems that the old gentleman has taken a great fancy to Harold, who, as you well know, can fascinate any one he chooses. Certainly, coming out here has been the making of him, for he has been as steady as a church, and his attentions to Gabrielle have been the first digressions he has made from absolute devotion to his business.

“And here, dear mother, I must stop, and save the rest for another day. Percy is leaning over me, and says I shall not write another word for fear of overtiring myself, but I tell him he is a goose. Give my love to Sophia, and to the Shorts, if they have returned from Alaska, and thank Emma for the pink baby shoes; and with oceans of love for yourself, dear mother, believe me,

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